The smallest of the eastern owls at about seven inches tall, the northern saw-whet owl has a cat-like face, an oversized head and bright yellow eyes. Females are normally larger than males.

They roost in dense evergreens, forests or thickets where their feathers provide camouflage. When threatened, the saw-whet owl can elongate its body to look like a tree branch or bump, sometimes bringing one wing around to the front of its body.

Their call is a series of toots or whistles. During breeding season, the call may last for several hours without a break. If the owl is scared, it will emit a sharp call that sounds like the whetting or sharpening of a saw.

These owls are strictly nocturnal, hunting at dusk and dropping from perches onto prey on the ground. A saw-whet owl may kill several mice in quick succession and hide excess food in safe places. A male may offer his catch to a female during breeding season.

Saw-whet owls are one of the most common owls across northern North America but because they are active almost exclusively at night, they are rarely seen.

Some national wildlife refuges offer “owl prowls.”