

Eastern Screech Owl

Scientific Name: *Otus asio*



Did You Know?

- Screech owls are highly nocturnal, and therefore are rarely seen hunting and feeding. How soon after dark individuals begin to hunt depends on weather and food abundance; males tend to begin hunting earlier than females.
- The owls swoop down from their perch to capture their prey; they rarely hover while hunting. Screech owls cache uneaten prey items in tree cavities.
- Screech owls do not migrate; they maintain home ranges throughout the winter. During severe weather, owls may move off their home range to search for food.
- These owls are primarily solitary except during the breeding season. Pairs occasionally roost together during the winter in hollow trees, nest boxes, and trees with dense foliage.
- Eastern Screech Owls have also been called the *Common Screech Owl*, *Ghost Owl*, *Dusk Owl*, *Little-eared Owl*, *Spirit Owl*, *Little Dukelet*, *Texas Screech-Owl*, *Whickering Owl*, *Little Grey Owl*, *Mottled Owl*, *Red Owl*, *Mouse Owl*, *Cat Owl*, *Shivering Owl*, and *Little Horned Owl*.
- The Eastern Screech-Owl flies fairly rapidly with a steady wingbeat (about 5 strokes/second). They rarely glide or hover, but may fly with erratic movements, when maneuvering through wooded areas. Their wings are broad and the head is held tucked in giving the bird a stubby appearance when flying.
- When threatened, an Eastern Screech Owl will stretch its body and tighten its feathers in order to look like a branch stub to avoid detection but will take flight when it knows it has been detected.

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General Information on Eastern Screech Owl

IDENTIFYING CHARACTERISTICS:

The Eastern Screech-Owl has two color phases, rufous and gray; rufous individuals live mainly in the south (more pine trees) and gray individuals in the north (more oak trees). The breast and belly are heavily streaked and spotted with black. Males and females look alike. They are approximately eight inches tall, with yellow eyes. They have ear tufts, which are conspicuous when raised. Eastern Screech-Owls have a pale bill and make a descending trill or whinny vocalization.

RANGE:

Eastern Screech-Owls are found east of the Rocky Mountains to the Atlantic. The species ranges from the Canadian boreal forests south to Mexico.

HABITAT:

They live in all forest types and prefer woodlands that are interspersed with the open clearings, meadows, and fields necessary for hunting. They also inhabit wetlands, orchards, suburban parks and gardens, and towns.

NESTING:

Before the breeding season, males defend an area containing several cavities. As part of patrolling their territories, males spend each night in a different cavity. Female Screech-owls select a nest site from the cavities on the male's territory. Females tend to choose cavities that have been well supplied with food by the male. They also prefer cavities in which they have successfully raised young in previous years. Nests are typically found in natural cavities, abandoned woodpecker holes, and hollow stumps and limbs. The western species also nests in saguaro cactus cavities and abandoned magpie nests. Screech-Owl females sit in the nest cavity a few days prior to egg laying. Eastern Screech-Owls lay three to four eggs in a clutch. The incubation period is 26 to 30 days. Because incubation usually begins with the first egg, the eggs develop at different rates and therefore hatch at different times. Nestlings leave the nest in the order they hatched; older nestlings leave first and younger ones leave on following days.

FEEDING HABITS:

Their diet is the most varied of any North American owl species, and is region-specific. They feed on insects, crayfish, earthworms, and all classes of vertebrates, including songbirds, reptiles, fish, amphibians, and small mammals such as squirrels, shrews, rabbits, bats, and rodents.