

: Bird Brief :

Eastern Screech Owl (Megascops asio)



ORDER: Strigiformes (2 Families)

FAMILY: Strigidae (229 Species)

Photos & text by
Heidi Meier
December 9, 2023

I was taking a nature walk on the Summerfest grounds overlooking Lakeshore State Park on a beautiful, crisp, clear, late, autumn day. While walking south near the lakefront by the boulders, I kept hearing a ruckus of cawing American Crows (corvids) coming from the top of some clustered Cottonwood trees. Usually, when there is a murder of crow jumping and cawing, it makes me think there is a raptor resting nearby. And to my delight, there was a fluffy, erect eared, robin-sized owl at the very top of the tree looking down at me from a branch concealing all but its head. I get so excited when I spot owls because I rarely get to see these stealthy, solitary, camouflaged, quiet birds on my walks.

When I see an owl, I always think of a few questions. Why do some birds, like corvids, pester these birds of prey? Is it because owls may have a better catch to steal in their talons? Or is the owl disturbing a crow's nest? This pestering behavior is called **mobbing**, and American Crow mob by aggressively calling while closely approaching the predator. The reason they mob is to alert other animals of a potential danger. The corvid ruckus can also bring other predators to the region, which typically is the reason small owls fly away! A final question I ponder is, do owls prefer the south side of trees to roost or nest in for optimal warmth during the winter? I usually spot Screech Owls in tree cavities on the southern side of deciduous trees or resting on a conifer branch in the sun on cold days. Studies *have* found that owls *do* prefer south to southeast tree habitats to protect themselves and nestlings from prevailing northerly winter winds.

Owls in our area are approaching the breeding season, which occurs in late winter. Eastern Screech Owls find lifetime mates unless one passes early, in which case, mate searching begins. Females respond to prospective males that jump along the branch they share while raising wings, and beak chattering. The male will offer her food while frequently blinking and bowing. The bonded pair often duet together with monotone trills. Both will search for nesting sites, but the female chooses the final location. The female will lay around four eggs and brood for a couple of weeks while the male delivers her food. The Eastern Screech Owl has a remarkable nesting behavior first observed by Gehlbach in Texas. He found that an adult owl will carry back a Texas blind snake to the nest in its bill. The snake will be dropped into the nest and then burrow to the bottom and feed on ants and fly larva that would otherwise attack the growing chicks. This is called a **symbiotic** relationship. Gehlbach found that this relationship greatly improved chick survivability and health.

Diet consists of insects, small mammals, small birds, and even fish. I often wonder if the regional diet causes different feather colorations because Eastern Screech Owls in northern and western habitats are more gray while owls in southern and eastern habitats are more red. Foraging is mostly at dawn and dusk.





One particular song bird that also forages early and late in the day is the Northern Cardinal, making this bird a common meal for Screech Owls. Unlike other raptors, which eat slowly, owls swallow prey whole to avoid predator interaction and regurgitate undigestible contents in the form of compact pellets. Owls have **zygodactyl** feet which means they can move the outer toe in front or in back which aids in capture of prey. Prey are caught off guard by owls in flight because of comb-like edging on the outer edges of the primary wings. This muffles all air sound traveling over the wings making them stealthy predators.



This is a great time of year to find a bird watching group to go out looking for owls. Owls are very difficult to see; however, they are more vocal during dusk and dawn. Use discretion when using any recorded owl sounds on your walk. If you play the “high horse whinny” Eastern Screech Owl song, this can alert Great Horned Owls to swoop in and take this small owl for a meal. Likewise, if you play a Great Horned Owl song, this can scare Screech Owls away from their safe habitat. Leave the playing of recorded sounds to your guide, hopefully before the walk. Study owl songs prior to venturing out. Avoid playing sounds on the actual walk.

Here is some additional information on providing nesting habits in your yard. In addition to native nests, Eastern Screech Owls *will* also seek artificial boxes for nesting. They prefer the following:

- Natural wood 8-10” square box - like a Wood Duck box
- Entrance hole of 3” at least 12” above the bottom of the box
- Coarse wood shavings for nest
- Face box towards the east or south
- Secure 10-20’ in shaded area
- Add additional nearby boxes for the pair, nestlings, and food cache (this will increase the chance the pair will accept your boxes).

Enjoy the winter season!



References:

1. Gehlbach, F.R. 1994. *The Eastern Screech Owl*. Texas A&M University Press, College Station, TX.
2. Gehlbach, F.R., and Baldrige, R.S., 1987. Live blind snakes (*Leptotyphlops dulcis*) in Eastern Screech Owl (*Otus asio*) nests: a novel commensalism. *Oncologia*, 71:560-563.
3. The Birder's Handbook. A Field Guide to the Natural History of North American Birds. Paul R. Ehrlich, D. S. Dobkin, D. Wheye. 1988. Simon and Schuster Inc., New York, NY.
4. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology Handbook of Bird Biology, 3rd Ed. Irby J. Lovette and J. W. Fitzpatrick. 2016. John Wiley and Sons, Ltd., Chichester, West Sussex.
5. Peterson Reference Guide to Owls of North America and the Caribbean. 2015. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, New York, NY.
6. The Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior. David Allen Sibley. 2001. Andrew Stewart Publishing, Inc., NY and Toronto.

