

Eastern Screech-Owl

Otus asio

There Was An Owl

There was an owl who lived in an oak, the more he heard, the less he spoke; the less he spoke the more he heard - Oh why can't we be like that old wise bird?

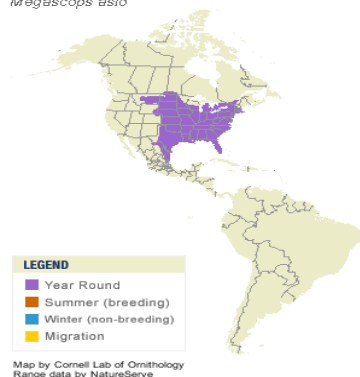
Author Unknown

Throughout history the owl (*Family: Strigidae*) has been featured in mythology, folklore and euphemisms. Who has not heard at one time or another someone being referred to as a “wise old owl” or called “a night owl”? In ancient Greece owls were often depicted as symbols of good fortune. Perhaps the wise old owl came from its association with the Little Owl, who was the messenger of Athena, the goddess of wisdom. Owls are one of the few birds that have been found in prehistoric cave paintings with fossils dating back 60 million years. Amazingly, these fossils show that the bird has changed little in that time.

The Eastern Screech-Owl can be found in nearly every habitat, including URWA's Fairview Farm, throughout the eastern United States and southern Canada. It is often the most common or only avian predator in wooded suburban and urban habitats. This small (approximately 8-9 inches in height and weighing only 6 ozs.) feathered ear-tufted owl will compete with other species for nest sites. Nests are typically found in natural cavities, abandoned woodpecker holes and hollow stumps and limbs. Its nest sites are often usurped by squirrels, European Starlings (which oddly enough are sometimes food for the owl) and Northern Flickers. The Eastern Screech-Owl will gamely use a nest box, and field studies show that boxes are selected as often as natural cavities for this purpose.

Reddish brown and gray are the two distinct color phases of the Eastern Screech-Owl with brown intermediates. No other North American owl has such distinctive plumage differences. Red and gray individuals can be seen across their range, with about 1/3 of owls being red. This species resembles and is closely related to the Western Screech-Owl (*Otus kennicottii*), from which it is distinguished by its descending trill, yellowish bill, and in some individuals, rufous coloration. Its one-pitch trilling sound, sometimes referred to as the Bounce Song, is used by family members to keep in contact with one another. The male also trills to advertise a nest site, court a female and announce that it has arrived at the nest with food. The Eastern Screech-Owl's descending whinny is used in territory defense, most often but not always uttered separately from the Bounce Song.

Eastern Screech-Owl
Megascops asio



Eastern Screech-Owl pairs usually are monogamous and remain together for life. Some males, however, will mate with two different females. The second female may evict the first female, lay her own eggs in the nest, and incubate both clutches. Nesting occurs between March and June, with an incubation period of thirty days for the three or four eggs. Both pair feed the nestlings for thirty days and tend the fledglings for eight to ten weeks.

This nocturnal bird feeds on terrestrial and aquatic invertebrates and vertebrates such as insects, arachnids, crayfish, song birds, fish and reptiles. Its diet is the most varied of any North American owl. It possesses powerful zygodactyl feet (they can rotate so that two toes point forward and two backward), allowing a strong, symmetrical grip on squirming prey. The Eastern Screech-Owl usually swallows its prey whole, although it occasionally first removes the head of a vertebrate or the spiny legs of an insect. Unlike the Snowy Owl that eats its prey out in the open, the Eastern Screech-Owl immediately

returns to cover after it catches its prey. Rather than grinding or dissolving indigestible materials, the owl's digestive system compacts fur, bones and the exoskeleton remains of invertebrates into compact pellets. These pellets, which are frequently seen littering the ground beneath favored roost sites, provide researchers with clues regarding roosting locations, the owl's diet and foraging patterns.

Fairview Farm features 5 miles of hiking trails. You will find, if you look, 18 Eastern Screech-Owl boxes erected along the trails throughout the property. So pack some water and binoculars, buckle the kids up in the car, and come for a walk. If you are still out at dusk, you just might hear the various barks, hoots, rasps, chuckles and screeches from our friend and neighbor, the Eastern Screech-Owl!

For more information, please visit:

[USGS Patuxent Bird Identification InfoCenter](#)

[Cornell Lab of Ornithology Eastern Screech-Owl Page](#)

[eNature.com](#)

[South Dakota Birds and Birding](#)

[The Internet Bird Collection Videos, Photos and Sounds](#)

[Animal Diversity Web](#)

[The Peregrine Fund](#)

[Owling.com](#)