

## Eastern Screech Owl

If a mysterious trill catches your attention in the night, bear in mind the spooky sound may come from an owl no bigger than a pint glass. Common east of the Rockies in woods, suburbs, and parks, the eastern screech-owl is found wherever trees are, and they're even willing to nest in backyard nest boxes. These supremely camouflaged birds hide out in nooks and tree crannies through the day, so train your ears and listen for them at night. I was delighted to hear one behind the house in the pecan bottom last night. Though they are fairly common, and we have had great horned, barred, & barn, this was the first screech owl in the 30 years we have lived here along the river.

Smaller birds can help you find screech-owls during the day. Listen for a commotion of blue jays, chickadees, and titmice—they may be mobbing a screech-owl (or other raptor), swooping around it with noisy calls.

Eastern screech-owls eat most kinds of small animals, including birds and mammals as well as surprisingly large numbers of invertebrates, including earthworms, insects, crayfish, tadpoles, frogs, and lizards. They eat many kinds of mammals, including rats, mice, squirrels, moles, and rabbits. Small birds taken as prey include flycatchers, swallows, thrushes, waxwings, and finches, as well as larger species such as jays, grouse, doves, shorebirds, and woodpeckers. This owl is agile enough to occasionally prey on bats, and can rarely even be cannibalistic. When prey is plentiful, Eastern screech-owls cache extra food in tree holes for as long as four days. Screech-owls regurgitate the bones, fur, and feathers of their prey in an oval pellet, usually once or twice a day. The ground beneath habitual owl roosts can be littered with pellets, and you can learn a lot from them about the owl's diet. However, data from pellets may underestimate the number of soft-bodied animals, like worms and insects, the owl has eaten.

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. Eastern screech-owls nest in holes and cavities, but never dig a cavity themselves. Thus, they depend on tree holes opened or enlarged by woodpeckers, fungus, rot, or squirrels. They often occupy abandoned woodpecker nest holes. Eastern screech-owls readily accept nest boxes.

Eastern screech-owls female lays her eggs on whatever debris is at the bottom of her nesting cavity, be it wood-chips, twigs, or the cast-off feathers and droppings from a previous year's nest. She does not build a nest, meaning she doesn't bring these things in to make it "comfy". Settling in, she makes a body-shaped depression where her eggs lie.

When nesting, the female stays in the nest hole except for brief dawn and dusk excursions. She and the nestlings are fed by her mate, though it is the female who tears the prey into small bits for the babies.

Eastern screech-owls are chiefly active at night, though they often hunt at dawn or dusk, and occasionally in daylight. These versatile hunters sit and wait in the trees for prey to pass below. They tend to pounce from perches

six to ten feet off the ground, occasionally snatching an insect or bat on the wing or hitting shallow water talons-first to snag fish or tadpoles. Most flights are short (less than 75 feet or so). When traveling between perches, these owls often drop, fly straight, and then rise again, in a characteristic U-shaped pattern.

Eastern screech-owls of the suburbs may fledge more young than their rural counterparts, probably because their predators are scarcer in the suburbs. At fledging, the young first hop to the ground or nearby branches, using feet and fluttering wings to climb laboriously back to safety. Young gain flight and hunting skills slowly; they depend on their parents for food for 8–10 weeks after fledging. Both parents feed the youngsters at this stage, and adults, especially the females, shelter together with the young in communal tree roosts. Gradually, as the young gain skill, they begin to roost and hunt apart from their parents and siblings.

Go outside & play even at night!