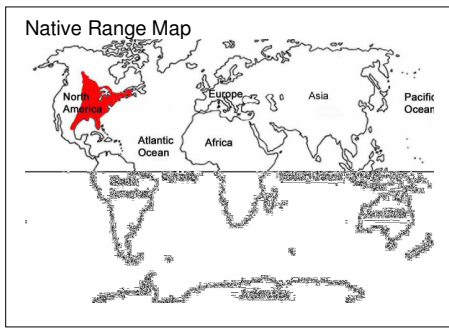


Eastern Screech Owl



Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Subphylum: Vertebrata
Class: Aves
Order: Strigiformes
Family: Strigidae
Genus: *Megascops*
Species: *asio*



Photo courtesy of Lynne Panebianco

Habitat

- **In the Wild:** The Eastern screech owl's range is east of the Rockies from Mexico to Canada. It is found in a variety of wooded habitats, including orchards, urban backyards, suburban parks and gardens.
- **Exhibit Location:** Pole barn; used in demonstrations on and off zoo grounds

Characteristics

- Length: 8-10 inches, females tend to be larger than males; Weight: 6-7 ounces; Wingspan: 22 inches
- Eastern screech owls come in one of two color morphs or phases (variations): reddish-brown or gray, with darker streaking and spots on the body. This camouflages the owls, helping them to blend in with the surrounding woodlands.
- Males and females look alike, with yellow eyes, pale gray-green bills, toe feathers, ear tufts that are noticeable when raised, and have a descending trill vocalization.
- **Lifespan: In the Wild-** up to 14 years (record) **In Captivity-** over 20 years

Behaviors

- The Eastern screech owl is nocturnal, being active from dusk to dawn, hunting mostly during the first 4 hours of darkness. Small prey is swallowed whole; larger prey is torn into pieces.
- Having one of the most diverse diets of any owl in North America, the screech owl will change to any suitable sized prey that is plentiful.
- These owls are non-migratory and usually solitary.
- When threatened, it will stretch its body and tighten its feathers in order to look like a branch stub to avoid detection. It will take flight when it knows it has been detected.
- Males have a lower-pitched voice than females. Calls are made during courtship, when defending the nest, and by the young when hungry. They do not call while flying, unless alarmed.
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** crickets, superworms

Reproduction

- The average age for sexual maturity for both male and female screech owls is 1 year.
- Most owl pairs, of about the same age, will bond for life. Male screech owls execute elaborate courtship displays. To advertise a nest site he will trill, hop, bow, bill snap and fill the nest with food. A female will usually choose a nest site that has been well supplied by the male. They will nest together during mating season and throughout the winter. Individuals will replace a mate that has disappeared.
- Nests are usually found in natural tree cavities, hollow stumps, and limbs. Remnant materials are formed into a depression, instead of building a nest in the cavity. They also use nest boxes.
- The clutch size is usually 3-4 white/off-white eggs, with an incubation period of 26-30 days. Usually having 1 brood a year, the eastern screech owl may have a second brood if the first is lost.
- Incubation and brooding (protecting by covering with wings) of the white, down-covered chicks is done mostly by the female. The male is responsible for providing food, defending the nest, and also roosting in the cavity with the female.
- Parents coax the nestlings to leave the nest by calling to them and withholding food. Nestlings leave the nest in the order of hatching. At this time they cannot fly, but hop and climb from branch to branch. They are independent 8-10 weeks after leaving the nest.
- At the end of the breeding season, the parents force the young off their birth territory. Little is known about this, but it appears to be affected by weather, food availability, and population density.

Diet

- **In the Wild:** insects, crayfish, earthworms, songbirds, rodents
- **At the Zoo:** mice

Conservation Status

- **IUCN status:** not listed; **CITES Appendix:** not listed
- Eastern screech owls are common in their range, and not currently threatened.
- Predators: owls, golden eagles, hawks, goshawks, buzzards, peregrine falcons, minks, skunks, snakes, weasels, raccoons, crows, blue jays

Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- The genus for the Eastern screech owl was recently changed from *Otus*, differentiating it from Scops-owls.
- A screech owl can approach prey in silence due to a specially designed saw tooth tip on the forward edge of flight feathers. These tips help to deaden the sound of air through the owl's wings.
- An owl has 14 neck bones; these extra bones allow the owl to turn its head 270 degrees or $\frac{3}{4}$ of a circle.
- Owls have a translucent third eyelid, or nictitating membrane, that keeps the eyeball clean and moist.
- Owls' eyes are placed in the middle of their face, giving them binocular vision, helping them to see more clearly. The large eyes and pupils are specially designed to let in extra light for seeing at night.
- The saucer-shaped areas around the eyes are called facial disks. These disks help to enhance hearing by funneling sound into the ear openings.
- Eastern screech owl pellets are medium-sized, averaging about 1.5 by 0.75 inches. They are compact, dark gray, ovals that are composed of fur, feathers, bones, teeth, and chitin. Two to four pellets are expelled per day.

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