

## *Wild Things in Your Woodlands*

### Eastern Screech-Owl (*Otus asio*)



The Eastern Screech-Owl is a small, nocturnal, predatory bird, about 8.5 inches in size. The robin-sized owl has short, rounded wings, bright yellow eyes, and a rounded head with visible “ear tufts.” The ear tufts, which the bird raises when alarmed, are otherwise inconspicuous. The facial disc is lightly mottled and has a prominent dark rim along the sides. The tail and the flight feathers of the wings are barred. The eastern screech-owl occurs in two color morphs, red and gray. The red color morph is more common near the coast, and the grey color morph is more common in the interior of the state. Male and female screech owls look alike.

In the fall, light and temperature conditions mimic those of spring, and birds and amphibians sometimes begin calling again, a behavior called autumnal recrudescence. At this time, the screech owl’s tremulous call can be heard in a variety of habitats including open woodlands, deciduous forests, parks, farms, riparian areas, swamps, old orchards, small woodlots, and suburban areas. This small owl is an often common, nocturnal bird in much of New York State, though it is uncommon in heavily forested regions, at high elevations, and on Long Island. The screech owl is a year-round resident, spending both the breeding and non-breeding seasons in the same area.

The screech owl nests in natural hollows or cavities in trees, old woodpecker holes, nesting boxes, and occasionally crevices in the sides of buildings. Screech owl pairs may roost together in the same tree cavity during the day throughout the breeding season. While the female is incubating the eggs, the male will bring food to her at night. The nest is usually about five to 20 feet off the ground. The female lays four or five eggs in wood chips, old leaves, and assorted fur and feathers from their prey.

While insects are a major food source in the summer, a hearty fare of small mammals and birds make up a majority of the screech-owl’s winter diet. To survive winter, this species eats quite a bit in the fall to put on fat stores, and may store food in holes.

The best way to create habitat for the eastern screech owl is to maintain large trees with natural holes (cavities), or trees with large woodpecker holes. In areas where such trees

are not available, nest boxes designed for screech-owls can be attached to trees in open forests, parks, next to woodland clearings, along forest edges, or along wooded stream edges. The nest box should have a 3-inch round opening and the box should be placed under a tree limb with the opening faces north. Add 2"-3" of wood shavings in the bottom of the nest box and place the box 10 – 30 feet high. For more information on nest boxes visit Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology's Bird House Network web site at <http://www.birds.cornell.edu/birdhouse/bhbasics/placement.html>

*Kristi Sullivan coordinates the Conservation Education Program at Cornell's Arnot Forest. More information on managing habitat for wildlife, as well as upcoming educational programs at the Arnot Forest can be found by visiting the Arnot Conservation Education Program web site at [arnotconservation.info](http://arnotconservation.info)*

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