

Eastern Screech-Owl *Megascops asio*



Folk Name: Death Owl, Shivering Owl, Squinch-eye

Status: Resident

Abundance: Uncommon

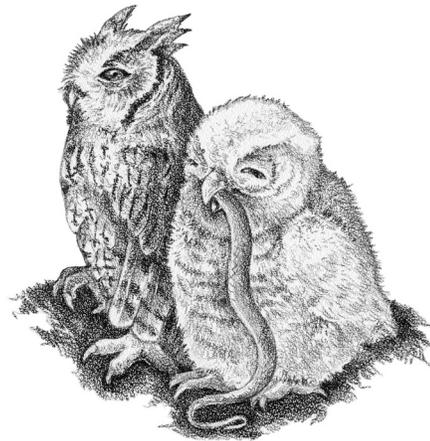
Habitat: Woodlands

The Eastern Screech-Owl is our smallest resident owl. At an average length of just 8 ½ inches, it is a full 1 ½ inches smaller than a robin. The Screech-Owl is a solitary owl with large yellow eyes with black pupils and noticeable ear tufts. Two color morphs are found in the region: red-phase and gray-phase. This small owl has a loud and eerie call that has been described as a “whinny” or a “tremulous quavering cry,” followed by a long-drawn-out trill or tremolo. Because of this strange cry, locals have given this bird various folk names including the “Death Owl” or “Shivering Owl.”

Many superstitions were linked with this diminutive owl. Local residents often associated its call with the possibility of a looming death and dreaded hearing it. One method to ward off a screech-owl was published in *The Concord Times* on July 5, 1894: “Some put the shovel or the poker in the fire place when a screech owl moans near the house.” In May 1895, the editor of *The Charlotte Observer* wrote: “Who listens to the screech owl, perched on a limb near his window, without having thoughts of uncanny things creep over him?” Louise Bennett shared this superstition she learned during her childhood in Mecklenburg County in the late 1800s: “The placing of a hairpin over a lamp chimney, hanging one prong in and one out, will stop the screeching of a screech owl.”

In Statesville in January 1892, one run-in with a screech-owl helped to somewhat ameliorate this owl’s sinister reputation:

What would probably have been a serious fire was narrowly averted at the residence of Mrs. Ellen Morrison Monday night. About 11 o’clock Messrs. Emile Clark and Gus. Fry were passing up the street by Mrs. Morrison’s when a “screech” owl flew against one of them and then lit in a tree nearby. While they were looking for rocks to throw at the owl their attention was attracted by a light in Mrs. Morrison’s back yard. Upon investigation they found two or three feet of the fence on fire and blazing away at a lively rate in close proximity to an out-building, which would have caught in a few minutes, and from it the fire would have been communicated to the dwelling. Messrs. Clarke and Fry, with the assistance of Dr. M.R. Adams, put the fire out without giving the alarm. ...The little owl, which was the indirect cause of the fire being discovered,



is being held in affectionate remembrance by Mrs. Morrison’s boarders, and Tuesday morning at breakfast a vote of thanks to his owlship was passed without a dissenting voice.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, the Eastern Screech-Owl was considered “very common” in the South Carolina portion of our region, and it was deemed “undoubtedly our most abundant member of the owl family” in the North Carolina section. Today, however, local birders believe the screech-owl is in decline in most urban and suburban areas throughout the region. Regrettably, there has been no targeted research to confirm this sentiment. This owl has become a difficult species to find on local spring and Christmas Bird Counts, and admissions of injured birds from this region to the Carolina Raptor Center have dropped steadily over the past couple decades. Several factors might be at work.



Eastern Screech-Owl using a nest box. (Jeff Lemons)

Owl versus vehicle collisions are believed to be one of the main contributing factors around Charlotte and our other large cities. Screech-Owls often hunt rodents, small birds, or other prey along busy roads, and they are regularly hit and killed. Habitat loss is another factor. Birds of North America notes that “reducing tree density below 50 trees/ha [hectare] or removing natural cavities extirpates” this cavity-nesting species. Finally, overuse of rodenticides and competition with the growing population of Barred Owls are also both believed to play a role as well.

Screech-Owls are cavity-nesting birds. They rely on the presence of natural cavities in trees as nesting sites. Due to their small size, they are able to nest in younger woods using natural cavities in smaller diameter trees than other owls, thus giving them a slight advantage. Hardwoods and pines are both acceptable; however, in this region, birders have anecdotally observed a preference for young pine stands. These owls generally avoid open land. They also readily use man-made cavities like chimneys and nest boxes. Pete Hogeboom, a longtime volunteer with Ducks Unlimited has recorded many screech-owls roosting or nesting in Wood Duck boxes along the Catawba River. He checked one box on March 25, 2000, and found an owl on three round white eggs. On 29 April, he found three large chicks, and one month after that, all the birds were gone.

Charlotte’s William McIlwaine provided some of our earliest dated records of screech-owls nesting in the region. In April 1928, he wrote: “More than once I have had the screech owls and the whip-poor-wills calling around my house on Lyndhurst Avenue.” He reported on May 28, 1928: “Mr. A.C. Sheldon tells me a set of young screech owls was reared in a bird box in a tall thick hedge just back of his home on Providence Road.” On September 3, 1929, he reported: “Two nights ago we had quite a solo from a Screech owl.” Finally, on April 13, 1931, he wrote: “Charley [Pegram] and some neighbors are watching a screech-owl’s nest. They report three eggs as of yesterday.”

Elizabeth Clarkson confirmed an Eastern Screech-Owl nesting in Charlotte in the spring of 1943, and in

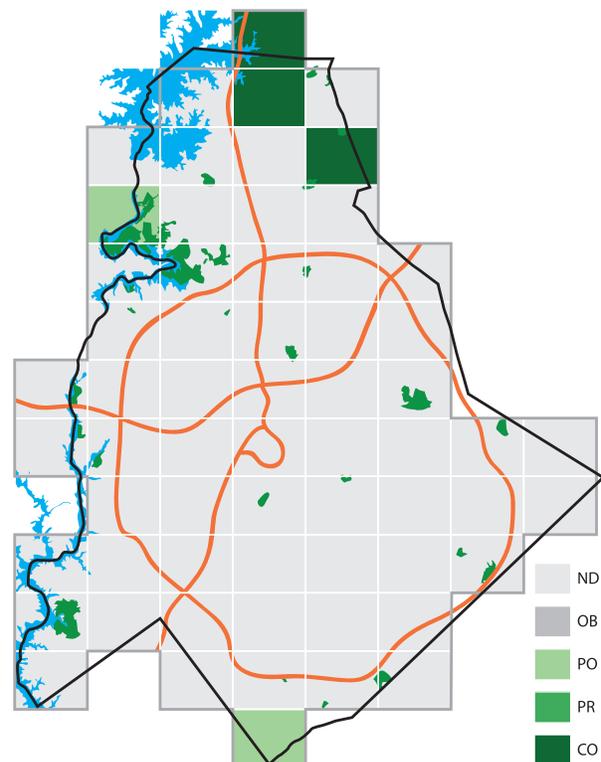


Nestling Eastern Screech-Owl gets banded during a Davidson College owl study. (Mary Wyant)

1946, her husband Edwin reported observing a screech-owl “sunning himself daily in an old Flicker hole” as he walked to his office each day. A family group of Eastern Screech-Owls was discovered on the Charlotte Spring Bird Count on May 15, 1976. Birders said the group consisted “of a red phase male, a gray phase female, and a red and gray young.” Females are a bit larger than males and occasionally some owls do exhibit both colors—which is known as “plumage polymorphism.”

In the field, birders will often play recordings of the call of the screech-owl over a speaker to draw songbirds out from their cover. Many songbirds become agitated when they hear the call of this predator as screech-owls readily feed on small birds, and they often provision their nestlings with birds captured during spring migration. The songbird mob will try to force the owl to leave. In the early 1980s, Dick Brown, a professor at UNC Charlotte, and his students conducted a study on “mobbing” that documented a total of 44 different species of songbirds in the region that actively engaged in mobbing in response to playback of the call of the Eastern Screech-Owl. This study speculated that mobbing evolved as a form of social communication to warn other birds in an area of the presence and specific location of this small, but ferociously predatory, owl.

Note: Thanks to Dr. Mark Stanback at Davidson College who shared nest location data from his ongoing Eastern Screech-Owl research studies.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Very Local (PR/0, CO/3)