



Screech Owl

Taking a Closer Look at Screech Owl!

By Merrill Tawse

An Eastern Screech Owl (*Megascops asio*, formerly *Otus asio*) occupies the second newly constructed cage in the animal room. This animal also came to us from a rehab facility after recovering from a broken wing. His injury is quite obvious as it didn't heal well. The wing droops. It has caused him to be completely unable to hunt. He is non-releasable and will remain in our care for life.

We have had a number of Screech Owls in the past. The owl comes in two color phases, red and gray. We have had both at GNC. The gray is found mostly in hardwood forests while the red is found more often in the pine woods. It seems obvious when looking at the color and pattern that they have each chosen an area where they are more concealed from their prey.

The Screech is an "eared" or tufted owl. It has feathers that stand up on its head that resemble tiny ears. These feathers are very useful to the bird, although NOT for hearing. Sound gathering is done with the feathers of the facial disk, just as in the Barred and other owls. The little ear tufts are useful as camouflage. Tree branches are angular. When the screech sits, tufts up, his profile is that of a branch or leaf cluster. Tufts down, he stands out as round-headed and looks like dinner for a Great Horned Owl (or other predator)

The Screech is one of the most powerful hunters of the night. His food consists of large insects, crawfish, rodents, and birds nearly as big as he is, such as the cardinal. Cardinal beaks have been found in the pellets of these tiny predators.

The call of the Screech Owl is not so much a screech as a wail or whinny. It has the quality of an emergency vehicle siren. Our last gray Screech actually returned the calls of the ambulances as they screamed up Rt. 42! They also make soft trilling or purring sounds. Their call is often imitated to call in other owls or birds. Little birds mob the

sound trying to encourage the predator to move to another location and other owls follow the noise looking for a free meal! It makes it hard for the little guy out there, during mating season, to call for a girlfriend! Beak snapping is an aggressive defense sound. It is used in the wild to defend territory or scare off mobbing songbirds.

This tiny owl is at home in many areas and can live wherever food, water and shelter are present. Because their diet is diverse and they can find suitable food most places, they can be encouraged to take up residence wherever a cavity is available for nesting or roosting. Plans for Screech Owl boxes are available from the Division of Wildlife and other sources. They add no material to their nest. Four to six white eggs are laid in early spring and brooded for about 4 weeks. The young stay in the nest for 4 weeks and spend another 4-8 weeks fledging. The family group may stay together until late summer or early fall at which time the young disperse and the adults remain on their range. The young usually do not end up more than a mile away from where they hatched.

Our owl is a male. Male and female is determined by size in most raptors. The male has a shorter wingspan and is lighter weight than the female.

One of the two smallest owls in Ohio (the other being the Saw-whet) the Screech is a delightful addition to GNC's educational program.