

Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area



Western Screech Owl (*Megascops kennicottii*)

Description/Size

Wing span: 18-24 inches

Length: 7.5-11 inches

Weight: 4-11 ounces

The western screech owl exhibits considerable geographic variation both in size and coloration. Size increases from south to north and from lowland to interior populations at higher elevations. Color varies but most commonly gray to brownish. Desert populations tend to be pale gray and those in the Northwest are brown or gray-brown. Some individuals in the Pacific Northwest rain forests are reddish brown. Sexes are alike in appearance although females average larger than males. A small owl with feathered "ear tufts" which may not be visible. Plumage is variegated dark and light. Upper parts are gray or brownish with dark streaks and fine white horizontal bars. Under parts are whitish with heavy dark vertical streaks that have numerous fine cross bars. Facial disk grayish or brownish-white with darker mottling and thick black lateral border. Black lores and above the eyes. Iris bright lemon yellow. Bill dark gray to black in southern populations, lighter gray in northern populations. Feet and toes feathered in northern populations, bristled in southern desert populations. Juveniles similar to adults but indistinct stripes and bars are more patterned with white. Nine subspecies recognized based largely on external measurements. *M. k. macfarlanei* is the subspecies found in Idaho. It is the largest of the subspecies; grayish brown.



Similar Species

Western screech owl long considered the same species as the Eastern Screech Owl. Recognition as separate species based chiefly on differences in vocalizations and behavior. Very similar in plumage; distinguishing characteristics are in fine detail of streaks and bars on contour feathers. Best identified by voice. Bouncing Ball song of Western is replaced in Eastern by a descending whinny, and Western's Double Trill is replaced in Eastern by a long, single trill. Whiskered Screech Owl – smaller; with small feet. Orange iris, yellow-olive bill, buffy/rusty neckring on otherwise grayish plumage. Found at higher elevations. Flammulated Owl – much smaller, dark brown eyes and unfeathered toes.

Habitat/Range



Found in a wide variety of woodland, forest and desert habitats at low elevations from southeast Alaska to western Texas and northwestern Mexico. Clearly associated with riparian habitats and deciduous trees over much of the range; highest densities are in riparian deciduous woodlands. Requires open forests with adequate roosting sites, an abundance prey, and cavities for nesting. Also occurs in semi-open country with scattered bushes and trees.

Food/Diet

Eats a wide variety of small animals—primarily small rodents, but also birds, amphibians, reptiles, fish, insects, slugs, snails, and worms. Depends on time of year, area and what is readily available. Small prey swallowed whole, while larger prey is carried in bill to a perch and then torn apart.

Voice

Up to 7 different vocalizations. Primary song an accelerating series of short whistled hoots (bouncing ball song) pwp pwp pwp pwp pwp pwp pwp pwp pwp slightly lower at end. Used for territorial and courtship advertising. Secondary call is a double trill -two series of trills, the first much shorter than the second. Used more as a contact call between mated pair. Other calls including barking, whining, chirping and chuckling. Non-vocal sounds include bill-snapping which appears defensive.

Behavior

Nocturnal – generally begins to forage 30 minutes after sundown and returns to daytime roost within 30 minutes of sunrise. Will hunt during the day if nestling food requirements demand it. Sit and wait predators, dropping from perches onto prey. Prefers to capture small animals on ground, but also gathers insects/spiders from foliage, captures fish in shallow water and captures flying insects on the wing. Will sometimes walk along the ground looking for prey and will chase prey for short distances. Stores prey items in cavities in winter. Hunts mainly in open woodlands, along edges of open fields or wetlands, or makes short forays into open fields.

Life Span



Flies fairly rapidly. Rarely glides or hovers, but may fly bat-like with erratic movements when maneuvering through wooded areas. Non-migratory. Adults tend to remain near their breeding areas year-round, while juveniles disperse in autumn. Territories vigorously defended year-round. Nesting pairs routinely drive off crows and jays, but mobbing flocks of songbirds are usually treated with indifference. Roosts next to tree trunk where individual's plumage matches bark of roost tree. When threatened, will stretch its body and tighten its feathers in order to look like a branch stub to avoid detection, but will take flight when it knows it has been detected.

Reproduction/Nesting

Clutch size: 2-7 eggs Eggs: Oval to broadly elliptical oval, 1.5 x 1.3 inches, white
Incubation: 26 days
Fledge: 35 days
Disperse: 2 months

Courtship begins Jan and Feb throughout range – sexes call to each other in duets, preen each other's heads and nibble at the other's beaks. Thought to be monogamous, though few studies have been done. Pairs mate for life but replace a dead mate fairly quickly. Nests in natural tree cavities, old woodpecker holes in trees or saguaro cacti, man-made nest boxes or crevices in cliffs. No nest material is added; eggs laid

on whatever material is in cavity. Once selected, a nest site is often used for several successive years. May lay replacement clutch if first clutch is lost early in the season. Young leave cavity to nearby branches at 28 days before they can fly well; they are capable climbers. Fully fledged about 7 days later. Juveniles remain in close association with their parents for the first 5 weeks following fledging. They then begin to wander more and more outside the ranges of their parents and roost farther away. In Idaho, young begin to disperse from their natal territories about 2 months after fledging, i.e., between late Jun and early Aug. These dispersal movements last only 1–2 weeks for most individuals. Most probably begin breeding when 1 year old.

Life Span

Longest recorded – 12 years 11 months.

Conservation Status

Not on the US Fish and Wildlife's Endangered or Threatened Species List. However it is protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Idaho Fish & Game lists the western screech owl as a protected non game species for which it is illegal to collect, harm or otherwise remove from its natural habitat. Two subspecies are listed in British Columbia, Canada; one endangered, the other a subspecies of concern. Populations are generally thought to be stable throughout much of the range, but habitat loss due to new high-density housing developments and clear-cut forestry techniques are having a negative impact. Removal of riparian forests in drier regions is a special concern. There is anecdotal evidence that coastal populations in the Pacific Northwest have been negatively impacted by the recent invasion of Barred Owls into that area. Traditional territories are being vacated by screech-owls as Barred Owls begin to breed in the immediate area. Barred owls prey on western screech owls. Cannibalism by other screech owls also occurs. This species also seems vulnerable to collisions with vehicles. Shooting and trapping are likely unimportant mortality factors as these owls are fairly inconspicuous making them less vulnerable to casual persecution. Pairs nesting in suburban habitats generally tolerant of humans close to their nests. May be sensitive to local disturbance at nest sites frequented by birding tour groups.

Viewing in the NCA

The western screech owl is seen in the NCA year-round.

Interesting Facts

Spanish name:

Tecolote occidental

- The scientific name comes from the Greek word *mega* meaning great and *scops* from the Greek word *scopus* meaning see referring to their excellent vision, and the Latinized name for the American naturalist Robert Kennicott.
- Other names: little grey owl, mottled owl, little cat owl, scritch owl, little horned owl, ghost owl, dusk owl.

Sources

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Birds of North America Online - http://bna.birds.comell.edu/BNA/account/Western_Screech-Owl/

US Fish and Wildlife Service –

http://ecos.fws.gov/tess_public/servlet/gov.doi.tess_public.servlets.VipListed?code=V&listings=0#B

Illustrations - courtesy of Loius Agassiz Fuertes / U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Map - The Peregrine Fund

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