

Birds: Eastern Screech Owl

By Sally Cureton

One of the eeriest sounds in the forest is the call of the **Eastern Screech Owl**. It has been described as a quavering and mournful wail. Some liken it to the whinny of a horse. It is one of the sounds that can frequently be heard in Massanutten during the nighttime hours. One of the smallest of the owls, this bird is only 7 to 10 inches tall, weighs 3-8 ounces with a wingspan of 10 inches. They have small tufts of feathers on the top of their head called ear tufts even though that is not where their ears are. The screech owl has two color phases, red-brown and gray. They frequently perch along side roadways where they have a clear view of rodents and insects that cross the road. I have found two of these birds in the early morning hours that had been hit by cars overnight on or near Palmer Road, one in each phase. They were truly beautiful little creatures.

Screech owls will inhabit the same area during their entire lifetime. They will have a territory of about ½ mile in size. Like most owls, they usually nest in a tree cavity or hollow stump. They will also use nest boxes. Often they will nest and roost together. The male will feed the female as she sits on the eggs. There will be 4-5 small eggs about 1 ½ inches long. Incubation lasts for 26 days and the nestlings will fledge after about 27 days. Screech owls live for about 6 years, although they have lived for 10 years in captivity.

One easy way to find a tree with an owl nest in it is to look for owl pellets at the base of the tree. When owls eat a small animal they swallow it whole. The parts that cannot be digested, bones, fur, etc. are regurgitated. These pellets are very useful to ornithologists because they make it easy to determine what the owls have been eating. A screech owl's diet generally consists of small mammals such as mice and voles, insects, small birds and reptiles. One interesting note is that they are fond of bathing and will do so every night. Clean feathers make for a soundless flight.

Screech owls are widespread throughout the eastern United States and will live in many different habitats including open woodland, forests, parks and towns. Even though their range is fairly extensive their numbers have been apparently declining due to creosote use on telecommunication poles they have used for nesting. In 1981, they were placed on the National Audubon Society's Blue List. This is a list begun in 1971 to provide early warning of species undergoing population or range reductions. In 1982 and 1986 they were listed as being of special concern. We are very fortunate to have a fairly constant population of them here.

Spring is almost here! Have you heard the birds in the mornings?