



tips & quips
about our
environment
and its
inhabitants

NATURE'S *reflections*

EASTERN SCREECH OWL

One of five owls found in Florida and the smallest

The Eastern screech owl, *Megascops asio*, is our smallest owl at just six to nine inches tall with an eighteen to twenty-two inch wingspan. It has prominent feathered ear tufts, a round head, big yellow eyes and dense streaked and barred plumages. There are three color variations red, brown, and gray with some variation between them. These color morphs are independent of the bird's age, sex, location or season. Due to a higher tolerance for warmer temperatures, red and brown morphs are more common in Florida. Sexes are similar. The Eastern screech owl is found in nearly every habitat throughout the eastern United States.

With its unique voice, a hollow-toned quavering whistle, rising then lowering in pitch, it may well be the owl most responsible for the eerie characterizations of folklore.

This predatory bird is strictly nocturnal, roosting in a tree during the daytime. While it is quite common, it generally goes unnoticed probably due to its size and coloring. It is active at night or near dusk, using its excellent hearing and night vision to locate prey.

The Eastern Screech owl hunts from dusk to dawn, but with more intensity during the first four hours of darkness. It hunts in open woodlands or along the edges of open fields or wetlands. When prey is spotted, the owl dives quickly and seizes it in its strong talons.

Screech owls capture flying insects on the wing. It is especially fond of palmetto bugs. This opportunistic hunter will switch to any suitably-sized prey and readily eats a variety of animals from worms and frogs to small fish or mammals such as mice, shrews, or moles. Most food is swallowed whole and small pellets of indigestible materials such as bone and fur are regurgitated. Finding fresh, moist pellets on the ground underneath a large tree is a good indication an owl hangs out there.

Pairs mate for life but will accept a new mate if the previous mate disappears. Between February and July a pair builds a nest in a tree cavity, abandoned woodpecker hole or nest box. Two to four white eggs are incubated by the female for twenty-six days. The male fearlessly defends the nest and provides food for his mate. Together they feed the young who leave the nest four weeks later. 🌿

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