



Wildlife Tree Stewardship Program – Okanagan-Similkameen SPECIES FACTSHEET

The Wildlife Tree Stewardship Program, also known as WiTS, is a voluntary program that conserves wildlife tree habitats through volunteer monitoring (of wildlife trees and bird activity), landowner agreements, and community education. It was first established on Vancouver Island through the Federation of BC Naturalists and has recently expanded to include the Lower Mainland and Okanagan-Similkameen. In the Okanagan-Similkameen, WiTS will focus on five bird species at risk. This fact sheet introduces one of our regions target species, the Western Screech-Owl. By identifying and monitoring nest sites for this owl, WiTS aims to assist its recovery and help protect its habitat.



Western Screech-Owl

What is a Western Screech-Owl?

The Western Screech-Owl (*Megascops kennicottii macfarlanei*) is a small, primarily nocturnal owl that inhabits deciduous riparian woodlands in BC's southern interior, primarily in the south Okanagan and lower Similkameen valleys. It nests in natural tree cavities, especially in large mature black cottonwood trees. Loss and degradation of riparian habitat and removal of cottonwood trees have resulted in substantial declines in Western Screech-Owl populations. As a result, this owl is listed as an **Endangered** species, both federally and provincially. Your help is needed to restore screech-owl habitat and restore populations of this special owl in our area!

SIMILAR SPECIES:

- **Flammulated Owl** (*Otus flammeolus*) is much smaller, has dark eyes, shorter ear tufts and a rusty shoulder patch.
- **Northern Pygmy-Owl** (*Glaucidium gnoma*) is much smaller, has no ear tufts and has two dark patches, edged with white on the back of its head.
- **Northern Saw-whet Owl** (*Aegolius acadicus*) is smaller, has no ear tufts and has broad reddish-brown streaks on its white chest.



DESCRIPTION:

- Small owl with conspicuous ear tufts and yellow eyes; mottled brownish-grey plumage.
- Body Length: 18-25 cm
- More often heard than seen; two common calls are: a hollow, whistled double trill, and a series of low whistles that speed up toward the end like a bouncing ball. Hooting may occur in every month, but is most frequent from February through April.

DIET:

- Mice, voles, shrews, frogs, reptiles and birds, large insects and earthworms.

HABITAT:

- Deciduous riparian woodlands found alongside rivers, streams, ponds and lakes below 1000 m elevation; will also hunt in adjacent grassland and dry coniferous woodland habitat.
- Nests in natural cavities in large live or dead trees, especially black cottonwood (*Populus trichocarpa*), but also trembling aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) and water birch (*Betula occidentalis*); may also nest in ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*) or interior Douglas-fir trees (*Pseudotsuga menziesii glauca*); will also use nest boxes.
- Roosts on branches adjacent to the trunks of trees or in natural tree cavities; pairs usually roost in separate locations; will also roost in nest boxes.

How can I help Western Screech-Owls?



Habitat Restoration

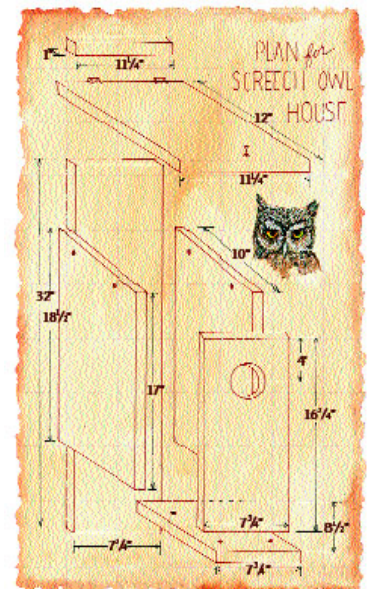
Western Screech-Owls are endangered in our area primarily because of loss and degradation of their riparian habitat. In fact, many other animals including mammals, reptiles, amphibians, insects, and other birds use the same declining habitat. Even our native fish require shade and other ecological services provided by healthy riparian plant communities. You can help restore screech-owl habitat by:

- allowing live or dead black cottonwood trees >36 cm in diameter, to remain standing
- allowing natural periodic flooding of riparian woodlands to encourage regeneration
- planting native deciduous trees and shrubs, or allowing natural vegetation to grow in the open understory of woodlands impacted by grazing or other land uses
- exclude livestock, development and recreational activities from riparian areas. Installation of fencing can help exclude cattle from riparian areas, while allowing grazing in adjacent upland areas with more suitable forage

Install a Screech-Owl Nest Box

Although they are not an adequate substitute for large live or dead trees with natural cavities, nest boxes can provide temporary nesting and roosting sites for screech-owls in riparian habitat undergoing restoration. Here are some tips for building (see diagram at right) and installing a nest box:

- use 1" thick, untreated solid wood or plywood
- opening hole should be 8 cm (3 in) in diameter
- place 1" layer of sawdust or woodchips at bottom of box
- nail or screw box to the largest tree in, or adjacent to riparian habitat; place the box 3 to 4.25 m (10 to 14 ft) above the ground, preferably as far away from roads or other developments as possible
- face nest box opening to the south or east
- install 1 box within 50 m of an existing tree cavity or install 2 boxes within 50 m of each other if no natural cavities are present
- record nest box location and elevation (record UTM coordinate in NAD 83 units); photograph installed nest box and record date of installation



Monitoring

- Listen for screech-owl calls at night. Calling birds are most often heard in early spring (February to April) but can be heard any month of the year. Young call June and July.
- Clutches of 2-3 eggs are laid from March to May.
- Fledgling period ranges from 1-1.5 months.

For more information on WiTS:

Lisa Scott, Regional Coordinator

Ph: (250) 404-0115 Email: witsos@shaw.ca

To report screech-owl sightings:

Bird Studies Canada: (250) 496-4049 or

Partners in Flight BC/Yukon at (250) 490-8286

Did you know?

Every year screech-owls are killed by vehicles on our local roadways. Some road kills occur on rainy nights when screech-owls are lured to roadways to hunt emerging earthworms! If you find a dead or injured bird, contact the South Okanagan Rehabilitation Centre for Owls (250) 498-4251.



Compiled by: Kristina Robbins

Originally prepared by Western Screech-Owl Recovery Team

(Text and photos by: Michael Bezener/One Wild Earth Ecological Services)

Nest Box plans from Audubon website: <http://magazine.audubon.org/backyard/backyard0201.html>

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