

Conservation Corner

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Last weekend, our park ranger fielded a rescue call of a young owl stranded on the streets of Laurens. Did you know Planet Earth is home to over 200 species of owls, including 25 species of screech owls? Iowa is home to nine species of owls, but only three of them are common year-round residents – the Great Horned, Barred, and Eastern Screech Owls. The stranded owlet, later relocated after a photo op, is an Eastern Screech Owl and will serve as this week's encounter with the bird world.

Like all owls, eastern screech owls have an upright stance, broad head, binocular vision and hearing, sharp talons, and feathers designed especially for silent flight. Their pointed ear tufts, which are often raised, give them a distinct silhouette. About the size of a robin, they are Iowa's smallest year-round owl resident. Though skilled predators, because of their small size they in turn are preyed upon by hawks and other owls.

Eastern screech owls have yellow eyes and come in two color phases or morphs. About two-thirds are gray morphs, including the Laurens dweller, while one-third are red or rufous morphs. Both are found throughout their range east of the Rockies, with the red morph being more common in the eastern states. Whether gray or red, their complex bands and spots make excellent camouflage against tree bark.

Like many songbirds, screech owls are heard far more often than they are seen. Their two main calls are a descending, eerie, wavering trill and a low, one-pitched melodic or tremolo trill. The wavering or whinny call, often compared to the scream of a terrified woman, is thought to be a territorial defense song while the tremolo is a family contact call, often sung in duets. And, if their nest is disturbed, the parent owls will dive at the intruder, screeching loudly and snapping their bills in protest.

Like most raptors, male screech owls are smaller than the females and more agile and skilled fliers and hunters. Their flight pattern is u-shaped as they drop, fly straight, and rise again. These small owls hunt at dawn, dusk, and night, sitting in a tree waiting for prey to pass by. Screech owls are not fussy eaters and will dine on insects, worms, crayfish, tadpoles, frogs, toads, small birds, rats, mice, squirrels, moles, rabbits, and the occasional bat.

Like many owls, eastern screech owls are secondary cavity nesters, using holes created by woodpeckers, fungi, rot, or squirrels, as well as nest boxes. Rather than forming a nest, the female simply lays 2-6 white eggs in the debris at the bottom of the cavity. The male does all the hunting while the female tears the prey into small bits to feed the young. Screech owlets are often slow to master flight and hunting skills and depend on their parents for 8-10 weeks after fledging.

Eastern screech owl populations are holding their own, thanks to their small size, habitat and human tolerance, and varied diet. Do you hear screech owls in your neighborhood?

