

Interpretive Animal Information



ARIZONA-SONORA
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Common Name:

Western Screech Owl

Scientific Names:

Megascops kennecottii

Classification:

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Aves

Order: Strigiformes

Family: Strigidae

Genus: *Megascops*

Species: *Megascops kennecottii*

Description:

The western Screech Owl was first described in 1867. The species name "*kennicotti*," was created to honour Robert Kennicott, an American explorer and naturalist (1835–1866). Originally, this bird was officially called "Kennicott's Owl". Common names include Little Horned Owl, Dusk Owl, Ghost Owl, Mouse Owl, Cat Owl, Little Cat Owl, Puget Sound Screech Owl, Washington Screech Owl, and Coastal Screech Owl.

The Western Screech Owl is a small woodland owl and is one of the west's more common owls at lower elevations. The iris is bright yellow and the bill is gray to black, with tufts of bristly feathers around its base. The facial disk is bordered by black. The toes are yellow. Plumage is either mainly grayish or reddish-brown variegated dark and light, resembling a furrowed tree bark pattern. They use the variegated plumage as camouflage.

Geographic Range:

Resident from south-coastal and extreme south-eastern Alaska, coastal and southern British Columbia, northern Idaho, western Montana, northwestern Wyoming, Colorado, extreme western Oklahoma, and western Texas south to Baja California.

Western Screech Owls also occur in northern



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Sinaloa and across the Mexican highlands through Chihuahua and Coahuila as far as the Distrito Federal.



Habitat:

Western Screech Owls inhabit a wide variety of habitats, from humid Douglas-fir, western hemlock, western red cedar, and Sitka spruce to lowland deciduous forests, riparian woodlands, oak-filled arroyos, desert saguaro and cardon cacti stands, Joshua tree and mesquite groves, and open pine and pinyon-juniper forests. In general, they require open forests with an abundance of small mammals and insect prey, and cavities for nesting.

Reproduction:

Western Screech Owls nest almost exclusively in tree cavities, but they will readily nest in suitable nest boxes. 2 to 5 (average 3-4) eggs are laid on natural sawdust on the floor of the cavity. The eggs are laid every 1 to 2 days and incubation begins after laying of the first. The incubation period is about 26 days and the fledging period about 35 days. Females incubate eggs and brood young while males bring food to the nest. The Western Screech Owl is single brooded, but may re-nest if first clutch is lost. Pairs will often

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reuse nest sites in consecutive years. Pairs mate for life but will accept a new mate if the previous mate is lost.

Food Habits:

The Screech Owl is a sit-and-wait hunter. It perches and then dives on prey, taking mice and other small mammals, birds, fish, reptiles, amphibians, and arthropods, killing with its talons. It preys on small birds frequently in nesting season. Insects are important in summer and fall.

Predation:

Western Screech Owls can fall prey to Northern Goshawks, Cooper's Hawks, Great Horned Owls, Barred Owls, Spotted Owls, Long-eared Owls, Great Gray Owls, Short-eared Owls, mink, weasels, raccoons, skunks, squirrels, snakes, and crows.

Conservation Status:

Generally common, although declining in some areas. Lack of nesting and roosting sites and competition with other cavity nesters may limit their populations in some areas. Habitat destruction and pesticide use adversely affect some populations. The effects of climate change are unknown at this point.

General:

The Screech Owl is nocturnal, with activity generally beginning 20-30 minutes after sunset. Flight is noiseless with soft wingbeats and gliding. It will become motionless if disturbed at its roost. When threatened, the bird stretches its body and tightens its feathers in order to look like a branch stub to avoid detection, but will take flight when it knows it has been detected. This owl is very aggressive when defending a nest site, and may attack humans.

The male's most common call is a mellow, muted trill "hoo-hoo-hoo....," or bouncing ball song, that speeds up at the end, but maintains a constant pitch. It is given by the male during the mating and nesting seasons, but also during the autumn and winter. This call is primarily territorial in nature. A secondary song is a double trill of rapid bursts. Other calls are a soft "cr-r-oo-

oo-oo-oo" given as a greeting call, and a sharp bark given when excited.

References

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