

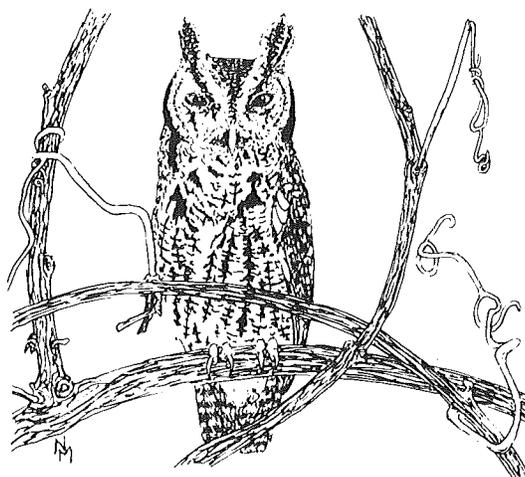
Eastern Screech-Owl

Otus asio

The Eastern Screech-Owl is a tiny bundle of ferocity. Roughly 20 cm (8 in) tall, in spite of its small size it survives the rigors of the winters in the northern part of its range. This species of screech-owl breeds along the length of eastern North America northward to southern Canada, and is usually a permanent resident within its range (Van Camp and Henny 1975). Appropriate habitat consists of old apple orchards, stream edges, woodlots, and villages. In Massachusetts, small hardwood forests were found to be a preferred habitat (Andrews and Komar 1982). Hollows in trees, old woodpecker holes, or nest boxes are a necessity both for breeding and winter roosting.

The Eastern Screech-Owl is named for its voice, which in fact resembles a trill or a quaver rather than a screech. Eastern Screech-Owls will eat what they can catch; their diet consists of small mammals—especially mice—insects, birds, amphibians, and even fish and reptiles (Errington 1932; Bent 1938). In some areas songbirds appear to be an important part of the prey caught for the young (Allen 1924; Van Camp and Henny 1975), which may explain the intense mobbing response songbirds display at the sight of a screech-owl.

The Eastern Screech-Owl was apparently commoner in Vermont in the nineteenth century (Thompson 1853; Cutting 1884; Fortner et al. 1933; GMAS records); Smith (1934b) called it a fairly common resident locally at low altitudes, and uncommon elsewhere. Spear (1976) detected a population decline from the 1940s to the 1970s. Before laws protected birds of prey, the screech-owl was an easy target for vandals because of its habit, when roosting in the open, of pulling itself up into a stiff dead-stub position, narrowing its eyes to slits, and trusting to its invisibility. The regeneration of Vermont's forests undoubtedly eliminated many of the small, separate woodlots used for nesting in the last century. Although insecticides have been suggested as a reason for the species'

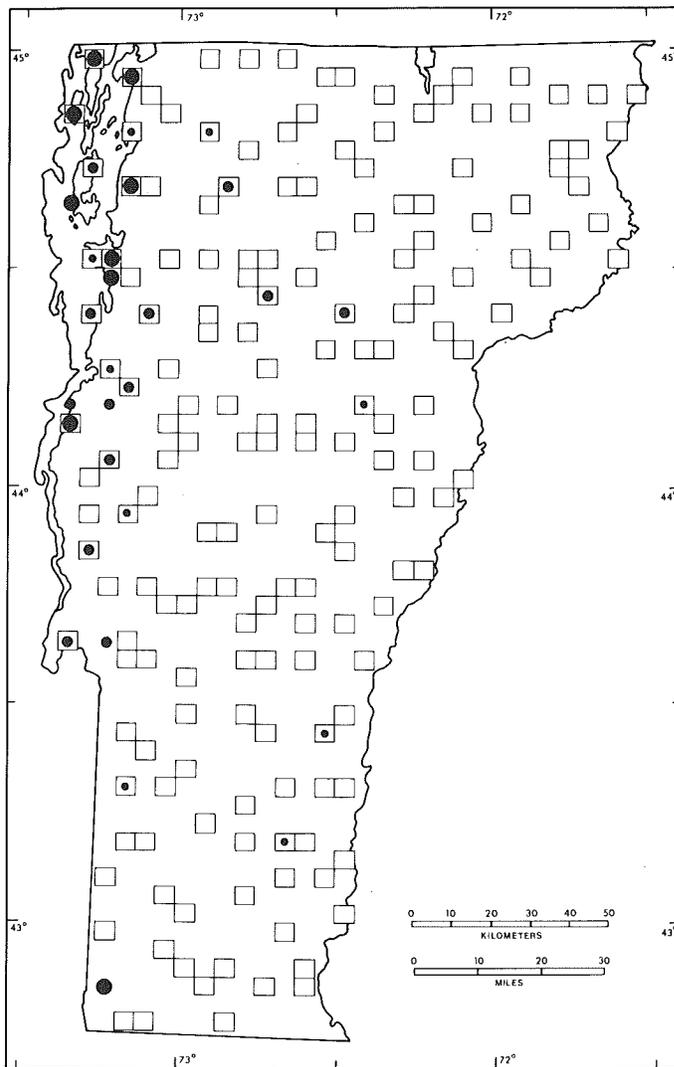


decline, Van Camp and Henny's (1975) study of screech-owls in Ohio detected no eggshell thinning.

The Atlas Project determined that the screech-owl is presently distributed over much of its former Vermont range. The species occurs in all physiographic regions except the Northeast Highlands, and its center of abundance is the Champlain Lowlands. This distribution agrees with that indicated by *Records of Vermont Birds* for 1973–83, in which 76% of all reports received in those 10 years were from the Champlain Valley, with concentrations in Ferrisburg, Burlington, Dead Creek, and Middlebury.

Eastern Screech-Owls occur in two color phases, a gray-phase and a red-phase, which are not related to age or sex. Studies in Ohio have shown that gray-phase individuals are better able to withstand severe winters. The red-phase birds, which have significantly higher metabolic requirements in temperatures below -5°C (23°F), experienced a sharp population drop during severe winters (Van Camp and Henny 1975; Mosher and Henny 1976). From 1973 to 1983, *Records of Vermont Birds* reported only 2 red-phase birds: 1 in a North Ferrisburg cow barn on February 13, 1978, and 1 found dead in North Hartland on December 13, 1979.

Eastern Screech-Owls have been recorded calling in every month of the year in Vermont (RVB, 1973–83), although calling peaks in the spring breeding season. Atlas



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 25 (14%)

Possible breeding: 9 (36% of total)
 Probable breeding: 10 (40% of total)
 Confirmed breeding: 6 (24% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	19	61	76
Green Mountains	1	2	4
North Central	1	5	4
Northeast Highlands	0	0	0
East Central	1	5	4
Taconic Mountains	1	6	4
Eastern Foothills	2	8	8

Project workers most frequently detected the species by hearing the territorial call (s). Courtship begins in February, with the pair sitting as close together as possible and preening each other (Bent 1938). The 4 or 5 eggs (out of a range of 2 to 8) are laid in the nesting hollow at intervals of 2 or 3 days; incubation begins usually with the first egg (Bent 1938; Terres 1980). The male feeds the female while she incubates; the young hatch after a 26-day incubation period (Sherman 1911), which is usually between April 15 and May 5 in Ohio (Van Camp and Henny 1975). Both parents feed the young (Allen 1924), which fledge in late May or early June in Ohio (Van Camp and

Henny 1975). The young remain dependent on the parents for food for some time afterward.

The Atlas Project established that the Eastern Screech-Owl has an apparently stable population in Vermont, especially in the Champlain Lowlands, and that it is a healthier population than many Vermont ornithologists would have predicted. The screech-owl appears to be recovering in Vermont from its decline earlier this century.

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