

STILLMAN NEWSLETTER



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SCREECHING OWLS

-- Mark Spreyer

*...the screech-owl, screeching loud,
Puts the wretch that lies in woe
In remembrance of a shroud.*

--William Shakespeare,
A Midsummer Night's Dream

Antarctica, makes an assortment of loud abrasive shrieks, screeches, and hisses. This owl's calls remind some of a brewing espresso coffee machine. Simply put, yesteryear's "screech owl" is today's barn owl.

North American screech owls don't screech. OK they can, on a rare occasion, screech but then so can barred or great horned owls.

The characteristic screech owl call sounds like a descending quavering whinny or whistle. The bird also makes a soft tremolo or trilling sound. So why do we call it a screech owl rather than a whistling owl?

Therein lies the beginning of this story.

By the way, we've had luck calling in wild screech owls during our winter owl walks (see Programs below).

The Bird of Avon

The opening quotation would suggest that screech owls (*Megascops asio*) can be found on Shakespeare's side of the Atlantic Ocean. In fact, what we call screech owls today can only be found on this side of the Atlantic.

So which owl's vocalization was Shakespeare describing? Lady MacBeth gives us some additional clues:

*It was the owl that shriek'd, the fatal bellman,
Which gives the stern'st good-night...
I heard the owls scream and the crickets cry.*

Lady Macbeth was, no doubt, hearing a barn owl scream. The barn owl (*Tyto alba*), found on all continents except

The Name Game

How did our non-screeching owl get stuck with its inappropriate name? The same way the New World robin did. Let me explain.

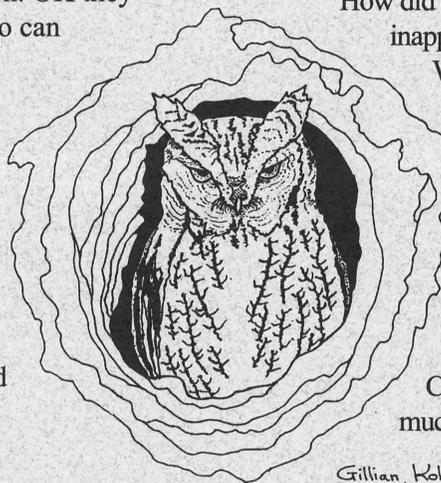
Early settlers of this "new world" often named novel plants and animals after species from the old country, which brings us to the American robin.

When English settlers first saw our robin it reminded them of the robin redbreast of Europe and so it became a "robin."

Compared to our robin, the European original is much smaller with a patch of orange-red limited to the throat and chest.

It belongs to a different group of birds than ours. Of course, such details were unimportant to early colonists.

In a similar vein, while the New World screech owl is smaller, it did have some things in common with the Old World



Eastern Screech Owl

Grillian Kohler
November, 2013

*By breaking up the round outline of its head,
its ear-like feather tufts help the screech owl
blend in with its background.*

RENEWAL REMINDER

If you see a 13 or smaller number after your name, this will be your last newsletter until you renew. If you didn't receive our annual membership letter, just use the form on the back of this newsletter or visit stillmannnc.org and click on "Become a Member or Volunteer." *We need your support.* Thank you.

STILLMAN NATURE CENTER

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screech owl (aka barn owl). Both are nocturnal, both have eyes in front of their heads, and both share habitats with humans.

It has been suggested that in the early days, some might have heard a barn owl shriek when observing a screech owl.

Be that as it may, that our screech owl was named after the “original” screech owl makes sense to me.

Backyard Hunters

Today, one of the biggest differences between barn owls and screech owls is their relative abundance. Barn owls are endangered in Illinois while screech owls are quite common.

Wooded suburban and urban landscapes support healthy populations of screech owls all across the eastern two-thirds of the U. S. In fact, they seem to prefer these habitats. Eastern screech owl populations increase in proportion to the density of humans in urban areas.

In a 30-year Texas study, it was shown that suburban screech owls nested earlier and successfully raised more owlets than their counterparts nesting in agricultural habitats.

Also, urban screech owls defend relatively small territories. They can be just ten to fifteen acres in size. Compare that to the rural owls that have territories as large as seventy-five acres, nearly the size of our nature center.

The benefits of the urban-suburban lifestyle are many. Urban environs are often a bit warmer during the cold months. This is known as the “heat island effect.”

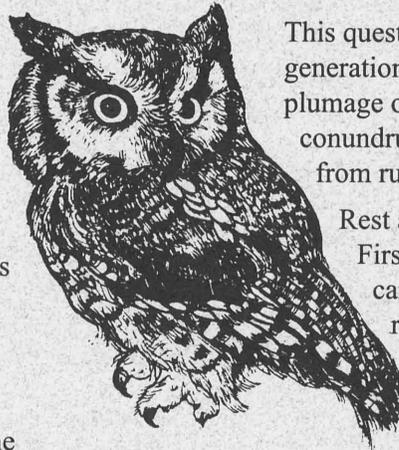
Thanks to sprinklers, retention ponds, and so on, suburbia is more likely to have a constant water source available.

In addition, cities and suburbs, particularly older towns, are likely to have large trees. Since screech owls nest in natural cavities such as woodpecker holes, these trees are made to order. They’ll also use nest boxes. (Plans for an owl nest box can be found at stillmann.org.)

These manmade conditions not only benefit the owl but their prey as well. Anyone who has thought of calling a pest control service knows how many mice, chipmunks, insects, and other critters are living in your garage, under the porch, near your garden, or in a crawl space.

With all this food concentrated in a small area, who needs a large territory?

The list of things this effective hunter eats is impressive. The owl’s menu includes: moths, beetles, earthworms, cicadas, crayfish, spiders, lizards, mice, rats, bats, chipmunks, toads, doves, jays, robins, and sparrows.



Not bad for a bird that stands a little under nine inches tall. While I’m at it, the bird has a wingspan that is just over twenty inches.

The screech owl is the only small eastern owl with ear tufts. The surface of the upper wings is marked with white spots. This owl comes in different colors, including red and gray... but why?

Red vs. Gray

This question has been plaguing ornithologists for generations. Julio De La Torre wrote that the gray to red plumage of eastern screech owls could be explained, “as a conundrum of nature designed to keep Ph.D. candidates from running out of dissertation material.”

Rest assured, I won’t be resolving that question here. First, though, understand that “red” does not mean cardinal red but actually refers to more of a rust or rufous color.

Second, there are brownish screech owls that are intermediate along the gray to red gradient. Nearly all color varieties can be seen in northern Illinois.

Nationally, the red birds make up about a third of the eastern screech owl population. They avoid northern latitudes, preferring the warmer and more humid conditions in the eastern and southern portions of their range.

It turns out that rufous feathers are more susceptible to abrasion than gray feathers. So, drier environments can mean more feather damage for the red owls.

It is thought that perhaps the red feathers offer poorer insulation than gray plumage. Interestingly, red screech owls are more common in the slightly warmer and moist suburbs than in agricultural habitats.

Brief Lives

Whatever the color or habitat, eastern screech owls are not around for long. Every year, roughly seventy percent of the juveniles and thirty percent of the adults die.

Causes of mortality range from road kills, window strikes, and poisoning to predators such as raccoons and weasels.

From the perspective of a short-lived nocturnal owl, those words from Lady MacBeth read differently:

*It was the owl that shriek’d,
the fatal bellman,
Which gives the stern ’st good-night...*

PROGRAMS

Program Basics: PLEASE CALL OR FAX US AT (847) 428-OWLS(6957), OR EMAIL STILLMAN AT: stillnc@wildblue.net TO MAKE RESERVATIONS for programs. Remember to include your name, phone number, and the number of people that will be attending.

If less than five people have called two days prior to a program, the activity could be cancelled. So, don't forget to call the nature center in advance. If you discover that you are unable to attend, please call to cancel your reservations. This courtesy will be greatly appreciated.

NEW YEAR'S DAY WALK

It's time again for our annual New Year's Day walk along Stillman's trails. Over the years, we've seen everything from bluebirds and shrikes to the remains of coyote kills. If you like winter, don't like football, or just want to greet 2014 outdoors; this is the walk for you.

Date: Wednesday, Jan. 1
Time: 10:00AM
Age: 10 years and up

THURSDAY TREKKERS

Join us outside for a healthy hour-long walk around a lake, through the woods, and who knows where else? Why not add Stillman to your list of exercise options? Come prepared to hike the trails with sturdy winter boots.

Dates: Thursdays, Jan. 2, Feb. 6, March 6
Time: 9:30AM
Fee: None

SNOWSHOEING with L.L. BEAN

To help you sample Stillman's winter scenery in a novel way, call the L.L. Bean store in S. Barrington at 1-888-552-5548 and register for an introductory snowshoeing adventure. Conditions permitting, Bean's snowshoeing classes are scheduled every Saturday and Sunday through March 10. Starlight snowshoe tours scheduled for Friday evenings through March. Don't forget to register with L.L. Bean in advance and here's hoping for snowy weekends!

SCAT & TRACK

Susan Allman will show you how to recognize the different types of scats and tracks made by winter's active animals. After an indoor introduction, explore Stillman's trails for signs of rabbit, squirrel, deer and fox. If there is no snow, we'll still go out to get nature's poop together, so to speak. Remember to call (847) 428-OWLS to make reservations.

Date: Sunday, Jan. 12
Time: 2:00PM
Fee: None



OWL MOON NIGHT HIKE

After an indoor program on owls, we will walk the trails in search of Stillman's great horned and screech owls. You'll be able to enjoy the winter landscape under the nearly full moon. Space is limited so call (847) 428-OWLS to make reservations. Don't forget to dress warmly.

Date: Saturday, Jan. 18
Time: 6:30PM
Age: 8 years and up
Member's Fee: Free
Non-member's Fee: \$5.00

RAPTORS for PHOTOGRAPHERS

After last year's success, Stillman is offering its second winter raptor photography day. Now's your chance to get a close-up of a peregrine falcon, broad-winged hawk, red-shouldered hawk plus great horned, barn, barred, and screech owls. We will bring the birds out in the afternoon light to increase your chances of getting that perfect image. Drop by anytime between 3:00 and 4:30PM.

Date: Saturday, Feb. 1
Time: 3:00 - 4:30PM
Fee: \$20/person



TREE IDENTIFICATION

Learn how to identify common trees such as cherry, maple, pine, and cedar. Easy to remember tips and simple hand-outs will keep you from barking up the wrong tree! Come prepared for the weather and bring your questions.

Date: Sunday, Feb. 9
Time: 2:00PM
Age: 10 years and up
Fee: None



WOODCOCK WATCH

In past years, the woodcocks have put on quite a show. Hopefully, the weather will cooperate and we'll have another good nuptial display this year. Bring your binoculars and come join the fun!

Date: Saturday, March 15
Time: 6:30PM
Fee: None
Age: 10 years and up



Please note that the Stillman Nature Center is available during the week, by reservation, to school classes. We also offer off-site live raptor programs for schools and community organizations. For more information about our programs and fees, just call or check our website at: stillmann.org

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If you aren't already a member, please consider joining us.

Yes, I'd like to become or continue as a member of the Stillman Nature Center.

You can also join online, just visit stillmannc.org and click on "Become a Member or Volunteer." Volunteer opportunities include teaching classes, clearing trails, and fundraising.

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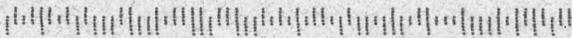
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Thank you for your donation.



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