

An owl box OF YOUR OWN

To see a screech-owl, put up a screech-owl nest box **BY KEVIN WALSH**

As a longtime hiker and bird-watcher, I know from experience how challenging it can be to spot screech-owls. Small, nocturnal, and elusive, they are occasionally heard but seldom seen. Until I built my first nest box, a lifetime of birding had accounted for a mere three sightings.

I vividly recall my first experience, at the conclusion of a lengthy hike. The owl was perched on the branch of a mighty oak, silhouetted against an orange sky in the fleeting moments just before sunset. On the other occasions, belligerent Blue Jays, in the light of day, led me to screech-owls that had the audacity to look out of the tree cavities they called home.

Well, that all changed in a dramatic way after I built a nest box. Now it's a rare day when I don't see a screech-owl or two.

A rufous Eastern Screech-Owl occupied my first house, going on 20 years ago, all winter. Every day in the late afternoon, it would emerge, prop itself up in the hole, and absorb the last rays of sunshine before venturing off on its nocturnal forays. The pattern continued for years: An owl would use the box as its winter roost and then disappear with the fairer springtime air. Finally, a pair of rufous screech-owls raised three owlets. Since then, not a year has passed when

my nest box has not been used as a winter roost, nesting box, or both.

My brother, my parents, and I all successfully host owls in backyard owl boxes, and some years, all three have fledged owlets. As a matter of fact, everyone I know who has installed a nest box eventually has attracted tenants.

If you're thinking that we live in an unusually bird-friendly environment, think again. We live in typical New York suburban neighborhoods. But suburbia in some ways is the ideal location for attracting your own backyard owls. It offers plentiful food resources and roosting sites, but nesting sites can be at a premium. Municipalities cut down aging trees for safety, and homeowners often do so for aesthetics. Since screech-owls don't excavate their own nest cavities, the house you erect may provide the best or only nesting shelter your neighborhood has to offer.

Squirrels are the bane of any screech-owl nest-box builder. On more occasions than I care to remember, I was excited to see a face in the entry hole but then disappointed to discover, through my binoculars, not the piercing yellow eyes of an owl, but the beady black eyes and whiskered face of a squirrel.

Anyone who has ever maintained a bird feeder knows firsthand the agility and determination of a squirrel. One

year, I had a pair of owls firmly entrenched in my nest box. Every day at dusk, the female peered out, while the male serenaded from the shelter of nearby evergreens. I had no doubt my box was destined for owlets.

Alas, once again my binoculars revealed that the yellow-eyed avian had been evicted by a furry mammal. Overnight, it seemed, a mother gray squirrel had filled the box with leaves to cradle her brood of hairless babies. Adding insult to injury, the owls called woefully from the evergreens.

I had erected the nest box on a freestanding 15-foot-tall pole and trimmed back the surrounding tree branches, but the squirrel had solved the riddle. Figuring that the squirrel had options — she could transport her brood back to the nest from whence they came — I gently lowered the house to the ground. Taking the hint, the squirrel carried the babies one by one to a leaf nest in a nearby tree. Hastily, I emptied the nest box of leaves, dug a new posthole farther from the tree line, and reinstalled the house. All the while, the owls never stopped whinnying. I went to bed that night hopeful the owls would follow my lead.

The next evening at twilight, I was relieved to witness a screech-owl prop itself up in the entry hole once again. In

PARENTAL PARADE: An Eastern Screech-Owl carries food to a box in a Cincinnati, Ohio, yard. The nest contained three young owlets.



Screech-owl timeline

Eastern Screech-Owls typically lay four or five white oval eggs toward the end of March, after courting from late January to mid-March. Nesting season begins slightly earlier in the south than in the north.

Only the female incubates the eggs, which take 29-31 days to hatch, on average. Brooding, too, is done by the female alone, while the male catches prey and delivers food to the nest.

Chicks leave the nest in hatching order, usually in mid-May. The fledglings either climb into the nest tree, jump to a nearby limb and climb higher, or fall to the ground and then walk or hop to the nearest tree. They remain dependent on their parents for 8-10 weeks.

time, the smaller, paler faces of curious owlets filled the entry hole. They fledged successfully later that June.

Care must be taken to squirrel-proof from below and above. I recommend mounting your nest box on a freestanding pole 10-15 feet high. The pole must be wrapped in aluminum sheathing or have a baffle to deter squirrels and raccoons. Study the house from a squirrel's vantage point and remove any branch that could be used to launch an aerial assault.

I have built my nest boxes according to the plans reproduced above. They're from the book *Woodworking for Wildlife: Homes for Birds and Animals*, by Carol L. Henderson, now in its third edition. (See sidebar.) The entry hole should be three inches in diameter. When possible, erect the box so it faces south or west so the owls can enjoy the sunshine before the night shift begins.

Fill the box with a few inches of dried pine needles. Screech-owls will soften the interior of the box with a collection of feathers, but a base of pine needles will cushion and insulate the

eggs. Pine needles are preferable to sawdust and woodchips because they are much less absorbent.

Construct the nest box so that you can open it for cleaning after each season. Adding fresh pine needles will reduce the chance that mites or other pest insects will infest the box.

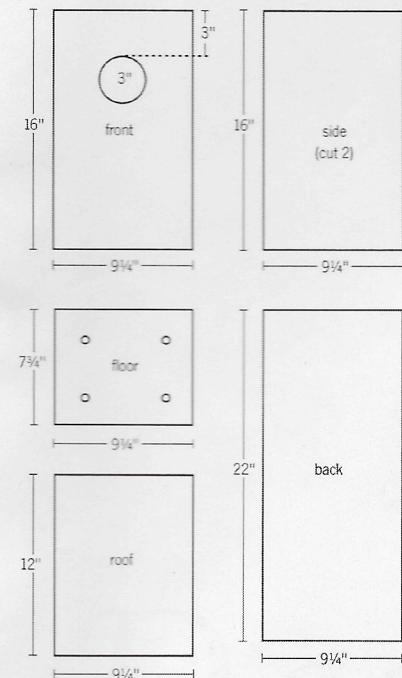
Depending upon where you live, your nest box could host an Eastern Screech-Owl, a Western Screech-Owl, a Whiskered Screech-Owl (in the mountains of the desert southwest), or, at more northerly latitudes, even a Northern Saw-whet Owl or Boreal Owl.

Readers on the East Coast may be lucky enough to host Eastern Screech-Owls of both color morphs. Currently, my female is gray and my male is the orange of a red fox. In the weeks prior to egg laying, the male and female take turns occupying the box. Sometimes, both emerge at day's end.

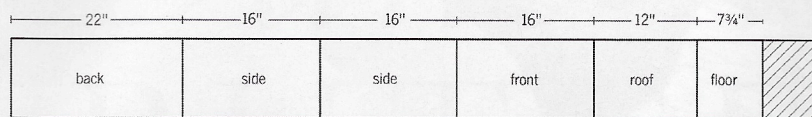
Once the female begins incubating, the male will roost nearby. Owls can often be found roosting in dense, dark evergreens. My male roosts in a row of Leyland cypress trees that serve as a

Homes for birds and animals

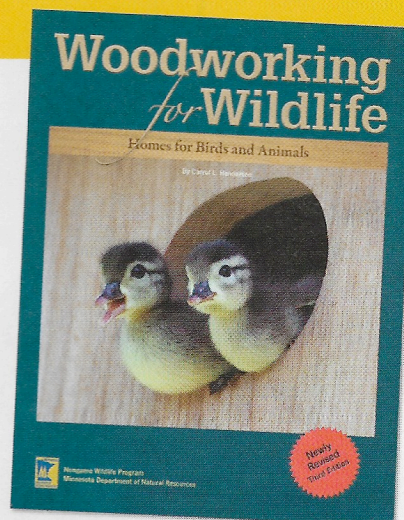
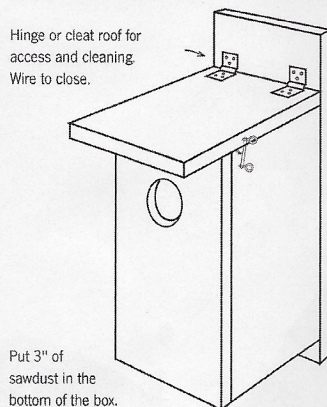
Woodworking for Wildlife (164 pages, soft cover, \$19.95) contains plans for nest boxes for wildlife ranging from screech-owls and mergansers to toads and bumblebees, as well as instructions on placing and maintaining boxes, deterring predators, and setting up remote cameras. The author, Carrol L. Henderson, is the nongame wildlife program supervisor for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and a longtime contributor to *BirdWatching*. In our June 2015 issue, he described birding in Cuba. You can purchase the book from Minnesota's Bookstore, in St. Paul (800-657-3757 or <http://www.comm.media.state.mn.us/bookstore/mnbookstore.asp>).



Lumber: 1" x 10" x 8'



Used with permission. ©2009, *Woodworking for Wildlife*, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.



DO IT YOURSELF: Plans from *Woodworking for Wildlife* show how to cut and drill an eight-foot board to make a nest box suitable for saw-whet and Boreal Owls as well as screech-owls.

natural fence between my property and my neighbor's yard. The trees grow as much as three to four feet a year.

As summer approaches, the owlets' whimpering grows more frequent and audible. Competition for food drives them to jostle at the entry hole to be first in line. My hammock has afforded me a front-row seat to a parade of parental offerings, including moths, beetles, and small rodents.

Most years, my owlets have fledged and dispersed quickly, but occasionally the fledglings linger near the nest box. If you approach too closely, both the chicks and the adults will scold you with loud bill-clacking. If their warning is not heeded, be prepared to duck, as the adults will swoop to compel you to retreat.

The benefits of hosting owls are varied and many. An owl that peers from your own nest box is a reward well worth the effort. Kids love trying to see the first owl of the year and then, after a pair takes up residence, competing to make the first daily sighting. For those of you with a spotting scope, to what better use could you possibly put it than to focus on

the entry hole and wait for your screech-owls to make their daily appearance?

You'll witness cautious woodpeckers, flickers, wrens, and titmice investigating the darkness of the box to see if anyone is

TABLET EXTRAS

Tap the links below to learn more about screech-owls.

PHOTO GALLERY

Reader photos of Eastern, Western, Whiskered, and other screech-owls.

SONGS AND CALLS

Recordings of tremolos and whinnies of Eastern Screech-Owls.

VOCAL AND ADORABLE

A video showing screech-owls at the World Bird Sanctuary, in Valley Park, Missouri.

PETERSON'S OWLS

Our review of Scott Weidensaul's 2015 reference guide to owls.

WOODWORKING FOR WILDLIFE

Purchase a copy of Carrol Henderson's book from Minnesota's Bookstore.

No tablet? Find a link to all Tablet Extras at www.BirdWatchingDaily.com/the-magazine/current-issue

home. Diminutive chickadees will buzz the sunning owls with no effect at all, while raucous Blue Jays will send the owls diving for cover. The reason songbirds grow anxious at the sight of a drowsy owl becomes clear every fall, when cleaning the box reveals a rainbow of feathers deposited as nesting material. Screech-owls are relentless rodent and insect predators — and therefore an environmentally sensitive alternative to pesticide use — but they do feed on the occasional songbird.

If you don't have a yard of your own, consider installing a nest box on a golf course or in a park, cemetery, or schoolyard. As birdwatchers, we owe a debt of gratitude to our avian friends for the joy and inspiration they freely give us. This debt can be repaid easily with the construction of a nest box. I know for a fact that if you build it, they will come. 🦉

Kevin Walsh is a fourth-grade teacher, a naturalist, and an avid lifelong bird-watcher. He lives in Miller Place, on the north shore of Long Island, New York.