



## Critters in Our Midst: Screech Owl

by Carol Ellis

My favorite times of day are near dusk and dawn. The time of day, when the shadows get longer and you can sit outside without a hat on, with coffee or cold drink in hand, and contemplate the wonders of nature.

It's the time of day full of chirping and songs, and the emergence of the critters.

It's the time before the sounds of daily human activities; the din of lawn mowers and leaf blowers, the constant chatter of workmen nearby.



A well-placed nesting box can provide nightly entertainment, as you watch papa owl emerge at dusk to forage for food, or as you observe the adult owls urging their fledgling owlets to freedom through the small hole in the box.

Think of how your morning walk would change if you pulled out the headphone plugs, and simply listened to the sounds of nature. Tune in, not out. I will use my iPhone on nature walks; it has an app called "Merlin" that listens to and records bird sounds, and in real time suggests a possible identification. For me, a nature lover who basically knows nothing, it has opened up a world of knowledge, and has brought me even closer to nature. As the names of birds are popping up on the screen, you get an idea of what may be making the sound, and aiding you in visually identifying it. The app can also be used by someone with a hearing loss; someone who can hear, but the sounds may not be crisp enough.

As areas are developed, and natural land is changed, birds lose their favorite trees and water sources. Several of my friends have installed screech owl nesting boxes in their yards, within view of their windows or porches. In the wild, screech owls nest in abandoned holes created by woodpeckers, for example.

Before I get a nesting box, I need to use "Merlin" to see if I already have owls in my yard, or vicinity. There might just be a natural "house" in my wooded acreage.

"Birders" are a pretty great bunch of people. A friend was invited for a cocktail at the home of a neighbor who had a "screech owl" nesting box in a palm tree outside the porch. Yes, lively Key Largo nightlife...sipping on a



A mama screech owl feeds a baby owl a cockroach snack. Eliminate the need for pesticides, as all birds, including owls, enjoy eating insects, and act as a natural remover of those pesky bugs. **Jim Duquesnel Photo**

Screech owls stay in the area, and do not migrate. Their lifespan is 10 years in the wild due to the amount of obstacles they encounter. Here they sit on a branch of the gumbo limbo tree. **Susan Kolterman Photo**

drink while listening to the "HOO." She later found an appropriate spot in her own yard, where she could enjoy the owls, who came year after year thereafter, until hurricane Irma tore the house down.

Have you ever heard someone say they never see any birds in their yard? Or maybe they do not know where to start looking for birds. The answer is, look in your backyard.

Ask yourself, what does a migrating bird or even a local bird, have to eat in your yard? Do you have any native plants? With development and habitat loss, there are increasing pressures on wildlife. If everybody just planted one native plant, that's a start. In a suburban jungle, one native tree may be fruiting, while in another there is pollen and nectar

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Once the chicks leave the nest, they do not go back in. **Bunny Bradov Photo**

attracting bugs and caterpillars. That is what they need to eat. Planting a yard with only palms and ornamentals is, for a bird, like you going to the store and there is only cat food on the shelves. What are you going to eat? Birds need fresh water, and cover too, so that they may hide from predators.

Owls can be a great source for natural pest control and it is free. No pesticide service or poison-filled plastic



Baby chick owllet peers out from his foliage camouflage. **Bunny Bradov Photo**

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Adult male screech owl looking out the small hole in the nesting box. **Bunny Bradov Photo**

boxes needed! Screech owls feed on all sorts of bugs, cockroaches, lizards, beetles, moths and rodents. Whatever they can see, catch in the air or pounce on is fair game. Spraying for bugs eliminates a food source. Owls can also be threatened by pest control of another kind... rat traps containing poison are a huge problem. The rat entering the box does not just eat the poison and die there, they eat the poison, then leave the trap, to slowly die from the effects wherever they wander off to. Unfortunately for the birds of prey such as the owl, or the hawk, that same poison does not discriminate between the rat, and the bird that just ate the rat.

For all of us, birds alert us to seasonal shifts like migration, teach us about communication, and the cycle of life through behaviors like predation, mating and nesting. Screech owls mate in late fall, and you can hear their noises. The baby owlets emerge from the nesting boxes in April or early May.

Nature is the law. It makes me want to get up early in the morning and keep going. The ecosystem is provided free of charge, no accessories required. And the benefits are lower rates of anxiety, depression and stress.



My friend got involved in screech owl gardening after being invited for cocktails at a home that had a screech owl nesting box in a palm tree outside the porch, where they'd sip on a cold drink and listen to the "HOO." **Nancy Fazio Photo**

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