

ABOUT THE COVER: Eastern Screech-Owl

Eastern Screech-Owls (*Otus asio*) are small, eight-inch owls with yellow eyes and pale bills. They have feathered ear tufts that are prominent when raised but when flattened give the bird a round-headed look. The significance of these hornlike tufts has led to several hypotheses that are described in *Birds of the Great Basin, A Natural History* by Fred A. Ryser, Jr. One explanation is that the tufts give the species a distinctive night silhouette in the eyes of other owls. Others speculate that the tufts have protective value because they mimic the ears of certain mammalian predators during threat displays and thus help the owl when approached by a predator that may yield to such a display. More believable is the hypothesis that ear tufts have camouflage functions. Ryser says, "Nocturnal owls are usually grayish or brownish in color and roost on branches during the day. When disturbed they often stretch, thinning their silhouettes. Then, the ear tufts make them look much like a broken vertical limb, since jagged breaks are more typical in nature than straight ones."

Eastern Screech-Owls are widely distributed throughout New England. Usually a permanent resident, they do demonstrate some irregular migration and movement, especially during the harsher winter months when food sources are not reliable. Their habitat preferences are small woodlots, old orchards, deciduous forests, parklands, and residential areas. Eastern Screech-Owls are good examples of polychromatism. There are three distinct color forms that occur in this species--red, brown, and gray. These are inherited phenotypes, usually referred to as color phases or color morphs. A study in Ohio found that gray-phase birds were more abundant in the northern part of the screech-owl's range, and the red-phase morphs predominant in the southern part. In 1976 J. A. Mosher and C. J. Henny reported in *The Auk* (93: 614-19) that red screech-owls had higher energy requirements at low temperatures, i.e., needed more food, than did gray morphs. Thus, red-phase owls might not survive in extreme cold because of the problem of catching enough prey to satisfy their greater energy needs.

Listen to an Eastern Screech-Owl, and you will realize that the name is a misnomer. There are two typical calls, neither of them a screech. One is a tremulous whistle, descending in pitch, and the other a long single trill, all on one pitch. Hearing these plaintive cries on a dark, still night may send shivers up the spines of the some listeners. Thoreau was so impressed by the sound that he wrote in one of his journals, "I love to hear their wailing, their doleful responses, trilled along the woodside, reminding me sometimes of music and singing birds, as if it were the dark and tearful side of music, the regrets and sighs that would fain be sung....They give me a new sense of the vastness and mystery of that nature which is the common dwelling of us both."

J. B. Hallett, Jr.