

BANDING SCREECH OWLS
By Chester John Robertson

To all who have ever banded, I am sure you will agree, it is exciting and quite rewarding whether it be small birds at the backyard feeder or, as in our case, the predators both hawks and owls.

The following will deal with one phase of our banding operation, that of the Screech Owl. They are small and inconspicuous but command respect among those upon whom they prey. At this point credit must go to John Hall, Jr., of North Andover, Massachusetts, who has been banding these owls for a number of years and who was instrumental in our starting a program here in Pennsylvania.

Because Screech Owls depend upon natural hollows in trees, barns or wherever they can find seclusion, the large nesting box properly placed is ideal. The size of our boxes is 9" x 9" x 17" deep with a 1" pitch to the roof. The top can be hinged and the hole for the birds to enter 3" or 4" in diameter. Place the hole as close to the top of the box as possible, thus giving the owls a deeper and darker cavity.

The ideal location to place these boxes would be low, swampy areas along large or small streams, as these swampy areas usually abound with rodents, the owls' principle diet. Before putting the boxes up place one or two inches of leaves, straw or shavings in them; since Screech Owls do not build nests this will help the female to incubate her eggs, should you be lucky enough to have a nest. Place boxes about 17' to 20' up facing south. This is important because the owls like to sun themselves during the winter and you will have much better reception to a box facing in this direction. There should be two or three boxes for each area covering a quarter of a mile.

As fall approaches and the leaves drop off the trees the owls will enter the boxes for seclusion and protection. From this time until after the nesting season, which ends in May, the boxes will be occupied.

At present we have 100 such boxes out, checking them during the winter months, banding the owls as winter roosties and as nestlings. Thus we are able to study range, distribution and density in our 20 square mile experimental area. In two years we have banded 53 Screech Owls; this of course includes adults as well as young.

Not only do the boxes help the bander, but more importantly, they give the owls many more needed cavities, for too frequently their natural hollows are destroyed by man and nature. Good luck to those banders who may have been inspired by such a program as we were!

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