

New Early Egg Date for Eastern Screech-Owl (*Megascops asio*) in Maryland

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On 22 February 2005, Scanlon discovered an Eastern Screech-Owl (*Megascops asio*) incubating a single egg. The nest was in a Wood Duck (*Aix sponsa*) box located on Morris Neck, Dorchester County, Maryland, which is approximately 15 km (9 mi) west of Cambridge. The box was situated on a post in a manmade slough, about 0.6 m (2 ft) above the water surface and approximately 5 m (16 ft) from the nearest dry shore. This box has been in place for 3 years. The single egg was a typical “ping pong ball,” being white and spheroid.

The general habitat of this area is typical of the Eastern Shore of Maryland. The slough is a depression surrounded by mature willow oaks (*Quercus phellos* L.), loblolly pines (*Pinus taeda* L.), and white oaks (*Quercus alba* L.) and was created when the field was first cleared many, many years ago. The slough is about 10 m (33 ft) wide and 90 m (295 ft) long and fills with rainwater in the fall and goes dry most summers. A ridge with loblolly pines, oaks (*Quercus* L. spp.), American beech (*Fagus grandifolia* Ehrh.) and holly (*Ilex* L. spp.) runs along the east side of the slough. To the west is a cultivated field. Oaks and other dominant vegetation (greenbrier [*Smilax* L. spp.], holly, pines (*Pinus* L. spp.), and tupelos [*Nyssa* L. spp.]) about 8 m (26 ft) deep form a field boundary up to the edge of the slough. Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) plantings (various cold season grasses and clover [*Trifolium* L. spp.]) edge this field out 30 m (98 ft) to the cultivated area. This latter area had been planted in corn (*Zea mays* L.) for the previous 3 years. The elevation is only a few meters above sea level and less than 1 km (0.6 mi) from tidewater.

Determining egg dates for cavity-nesting birds, particularly nocturnal owls, is not readily accomplished. Iliff et al. (1996) and Jeschke (1996) give the earliest Maryland egg date for the Eastern Screech-Owl as 8 March without further documentation. This observation west of Cambridge moves that date two full weeks earlier. Jeschke (1996) cites Ringler (1990) where David Czaplak reported observing a pair of Eastern Screech-Owls with a fledgling on 19 March 1990 in the District of Columbia. Thus, still earlier egg dates for this owl than

the one reported here are quite likely for this area. The only follow up to see if this 2005 nest was successful was in the fall of 2005 when the box was briefly checked. It had evidence that it had been used by Wood Ducks, but no clear evidence that the Eastern Screech-Owls had fledged young. The ducks can start nests as late as mid-May, which could be just after a successful owl brood had fledged, if started as early as this clutch.

LITERATURE CITED

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- Ringler, R.F. 1990. The season: Spring migration, March 1 - May 31, 1990. *Maryland Birdlife* 46(3):86–108.



Eastern Screech-Owl, Red Morph by Ikumi Kayama

Digital watercolor, 2016.
 “This Eastern Screech-Owl was painted after owling with a group of MOS members. Although we did not see or hear any screech-owls that night, I was inspired to paint one. I used many photo references and read about common morphs found in the region. From the references, I rebuilt the bird to highlight their anatomical characteristics--ear tufts, yellow eyes, complex patterning on the body, etc. to create an ideal specimen.”

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