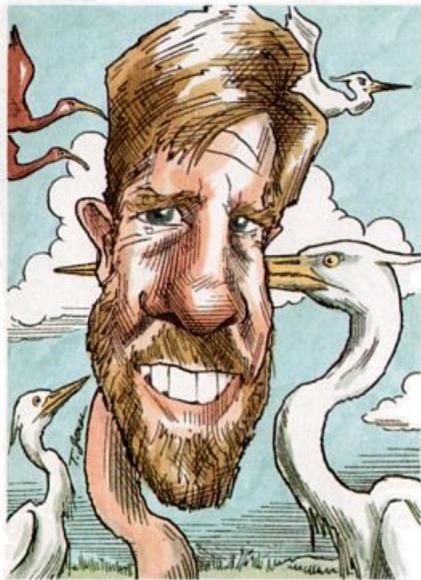


THE PRACTICED EYE

*Kenn Kaufman and Rick Bowers
Photographs By Rick Bowers*



Comparing the Screech-Owls

ACROSS MUCH OF NORTH AMERICA, music for warm summer nights is provided by the mellow hoots, purring trills, and soft wailing cries of the screech-owls. These little owls are, in fact, among the most common birds in many areas, although they may go largely undetected by people who do all their birding in daylight.

Going undetected in daylight is an important survival skill for screech-owls, and their plumage patterns seem designed for that purpose. They look like tree bark: gray or brown or reddish-brown, with their shapes broken by streaks and bars and vermiculations. Their patterns are so intricate, and there is so much variation among individuals and across regions, that it took many years for scientists to conclude that the widespread birds of east and west were really two different species. What was formerly called "Common Screech-Owl" is now divided into Eastern Screech-Owl (*Otus asio*), and Western Screech-Owl (*Otus kennicottii*). In the mountains of southern Arizona, the latter overlaps with a third species, Whiskered Screech-Owl (*Otus trichopsis*).

At night, these three similar birds are most easily distinguished by voice. The Eastern has a quavering, descending wail, like the whinny of a distant horse, while the Western gives an accelerating series of soft hoots, like a dropped ball bouncing to a standstill. Both birds also have low-pitched trills: a long single one in the Eastern, and



Eastern Screech-Owl of the race mcallii, found in extreme southern Texas. This interesting form is classified as a race of Eastern, but its plumage pattern is somewhat more like that of Western; supposedly it never gives the descending wailing call, only the long low-pitched trill.

a doubled trill (one short, one long) in the Western. Whiskered Screech-Owl, a more inventive vocalist, has a rapid "Morse Code" series of short and long hoots—"dots and dashes"—as well as a fast group of seven or eight hoots, slowing toward the end. All of these calls can be learned (and imitated, to attract the owls) with a little practice.

But a silent screech-owl can be much more confusing. Where two species are possible—along the western edge of the Great Plains, in southwestern Texas, and at middle elevations in Arizona—the delight of discovering a perched screech-owl in daylight can turn into the frustration of trying to name it. This "Practiced Eye" focuses on how to identify these birds by sight alone.

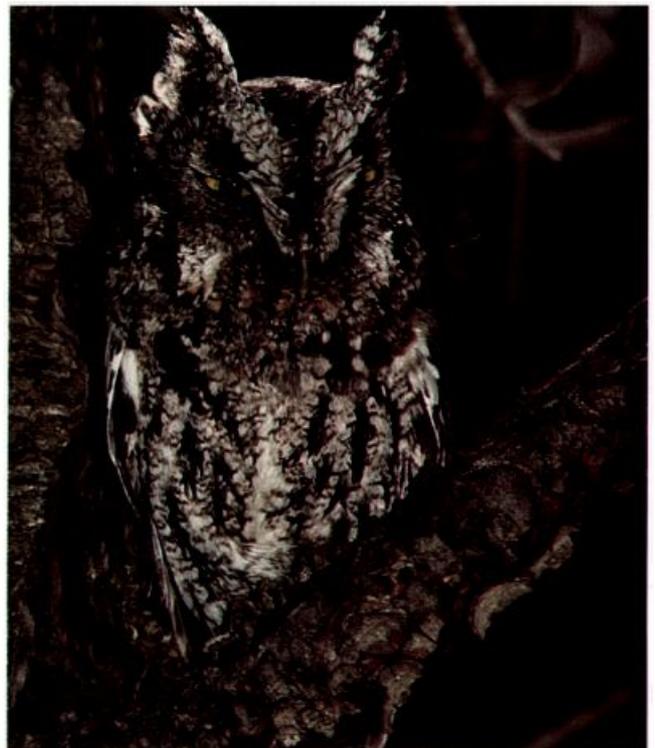
Many Eastern Screech-Owls (especially in the South), and some Westerns in the Pacific Northwest, come in brown or reddish morphs. But these more colorful birds of the east and northwest apparently are never in contact, and the Whiskeredreds found in Arizona are always gray. So visual identification problems with screech-owls in North America will always involve gray birds like those pictured here.



Eastern Screech-Owl. At first glance the pattern seems too intricate for words, but a close look at the underparts shows that each vertical stripe has obvious horizontal crossbars.



Western Screech-Owl. The horizontal crossbars on the underparts are very narrow, emphasizing the vertical stripes. Notice the size of the feet.



Whiskered Screech-Owl. The plumage pattern is coarse, and the small feet are barely visible over the branch. In this posture, compressed for camouflage, the ear-tufts are much more conspicuous than usual.



Eastern Screech-Owl. The base of the bill is greenish rather than black, an important visual mark.



Whiskered Screech-Owl. The greenish-yellow base of the bill would be visible in the field with a good binocular view.



Western Screech-Owl. This close-up shows that the tip of the upper mandible is pale, as on all screech-owls, but the base of the bill is blackish.

At first sight, the plumage patterns of screech-owls might seem too complex to be described easily; but some aspects are worth the effort, because they differ among the species.

The underparts on all three species have a pattern made up of a dark vertical stripe down the shaft of each feather, crossed by dark horizontal bars. On the Eastern, the dark crossbars are relatively bold (although not as thick as the vertical stripes), and are rather widely spaced. On the Western, the crossbars tend to be closer together and are mostly much narrower than the heavy black vertical stripes. The Whiskered has a pattern more like that of the Eastern, but usually with a more bold or jagged look (*i.e.*, it is patterned like rougher bark).

The back feathers of screech-owls are darker, and their pattern is more difficult to pick out. However, differences in back pattern among the three species are roughly parallel to the differences in their underparts. The Western Screech-Owl has a back pattern dominated by the black vertical stripes, while the Eastern and Whiskered have more obvious horizontal



Juvenile Western Screech-Owl. On this very young bird, the base of the bill is paler (more blue-gray) than in the adult.



Juvenile Whiskered Screech-Owl. The greenish bill color typical of the adult is already apparent.

crossbars. The pattern of the Whiskered, in particular, looks coarsely spotted or variegated; “Spotted Screech-Owl” was one name formerly given to the species.

Eastern and Western screech-owls are virtually the same size. Whiskered Screech-Owl is smaller, but unless it were to be seen side by side with a Western (which never happens) the difference would not be apparent. However, the *feet* of the Whiskered are proportionately *much smaller*, and this difference can be seen in the field with a little practice.

One of the best visual field marks is the color of the bill. This refers only to the basal three-fourths of the bill, actually, because the tip of the upper mandible is similar in all three species: a pale horn color or dull yellowish-white. However, the remainder of the bill is usually *dark gray* or *black* in the Western Screech-Owl, and *yellowish* to *light green* in both the Eastern and Whiskered screech-owls. The only exception involves some Westerns in the Pacific Northwest, beyond any possible confusion with Easterns, that may also have light-colored bills. Some field guides have misrepresented the bill of the Whiskered as black, so this field mark has not received the attention it deserves, although bill color is easier to see and to judge than foot size. It still requires

a fairly close view—but luckily for birders, screech-owls are frequently easy to approach, especially in the daytime.

A complication is provided by juvenile birds. Eastern Screech-Owls seem to have the typical greenish bill color of adults by the time they leave the nest, and Whiskered show the adult color at least by a week or two after fledging, if not sooner. But young Westerns may have paler bills than adults—blue-gray, rather than blackish. This blue-gray color can look *slightly* greenish at times, especially in the harsh light of a flashlight at night. If you encounter one of these problematic juveniles, the easiest approach may be to look around for its parents, who probably will be somewhere not far away.

Editor’s Note: *This column is usually written by Kenn Kaufman and illustrated with photographs from VI-REO (Visual Resources for Ornithology), the great bird-photo collection at the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia. For this issue, however, we have taken on a guest co-author and photographer, to take advantage of Rick Bowers’ extensive experience with the owls.*