

FIRST RECORD OF THE EASTERN SCREECH-OWL IN NEW MEXICO

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Early on the morning of 18 November 2003, Avery encountered a calling Eastern Screech-Owl (*Megascops asio*) in an elm tree (*Ulmus* sp.) adjacent to the campus of Eastern New Mexico University in Portales, Roosevelt County, New Mexico. The bird was then photographed and tape-recorded on 20 November by Avery and Keller (Figure 1).

The bird was identifiable as an Eastern Screech-Owl by its sustained tremolo call and intermediate rufous plumage. In the Great Plains, 7% of all Eastern Screech-Owls are of the rufous morph (Sibley 2000). Local Western Screech-Owls (*M. kennicottii*) should not be rufous, as in the Western any coloration other than gray is known only in subspecies *M. k. kennicottii* of the coastal Pacific Northwest (Cannings and Angell 2001). The Eastern Screech-Owl at Portales gave a 3- to 4-second tremolo call on one pitch, repeating it approximately every 15 seconds. These bouts of singing often lasted for 20 minutes or more.

The owl was observed frequently through the end of 2003. During 2004, encounters with the calling bird were regular, and observations continued until early September. The owl resumed calling in late October and was observed until May 2005. It reappeared again in March 2006. Over the time it was observed, the owl shifted its center of activity from elm trees in a residential neighborhood during the winter of 2003–04 to the center of the university campus, where it was frequently found in black locust trees (*Robinia pseudoacacia*) surrounded by open lawn. The total distance moved from one center of activity to the other was about 400 m to the southwest. The owl often was seen perched low in a lone black locust tree on the campus grounds approximately 75 m from any vegetation other than tended grass.

The nearest records of the Eastern Screech-Owl are from the panhandle of Oklahoma, southeastern Colorado, and western Texas, primarily from Amarillo and Lubbock, which are both >130 km to the northeast and southeast, respectively, from Portales, which lies in New Mexico's eastern plains (Gehlbach 1995, 2001, Seyffert 2001, National Audubon Society 2002, Reinking 2004). The Eastern Screech-Owl appears to be expanding its range slightly to the north and west, possibly as a result of increased urbanization (Gehlbach 1995, 2001). It is an omnivorous species, enabling it to occupy a range of habitats broader than most other owls' (Elphick et al. 2001). It is found frequently in urban environments, using nest-boxes for nesting and roosting.

This bird was considered a resident because of its presence throughout the summer months of 2004. Eastern Screech-Owls typically begin nesting in early March with fledglings hatching in May (Gehlbach 2001). In spite of its presence through summer 2004, the Eastern Screech-Owl at Portales was never seen with another owl and is presumed to have been a single individual.

This record is considered the first of the Eastern Screech-Owl for New Mexico by the New Mexico Bird Records Committee (record number 2005-09). Many birders and ornithologists from throughout New Mexico, California, and Arizona traveled to see this owl. As is typical of the Eastern Screech-Owl, it was relatively tame.

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LITERATURE CITED

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NOTES



Figure 1. Eastern Screech-Owl (*Megascops asio*) in Portales, New Mexico. First state record for New Mexico, photographed 20 November 2003.

Photo by Julian D. Avery

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