

Western Screech-owl

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Megascops kennicottii*. Named to honor Robert Kennicott, a Smithsonian Institution naturalist in the mid-1800s.

DESCRIPTION: This is a small owl with cryptic plumage, intense yellow eyes and a pair of inch-long feather tufts on the head.

The Western's call consists of five to 15 short hoots that speed up toward the end.

DISTRIBUTION: Nonmigratory throughout its range, which is mainly within 12 Western states and Mexico, and reaches up the coast of British Columbia to southern Alaska. They live at low or mid-elevations in Arizona

that is a few inches long, including rodents, insects, birds, frogs, bats, reptiles, crayfish, worms, whip scorpions and even fish. They hunt at twilight and nighttime, watching, listening and waiting for prey while perched. They are themselves at risk of predation by larger raptors.

Western screech-owls roost in trees, standing on branches next to trunks (relying on plumage to blend in) or concealing themselves in tree cavities, caves, crevices and sometimes buildings. Mated pairs stay together and defend their territory year-round, then engage in courtship January–March. The male often takes food to the female at this time, and the two further bond by preening each other's feathers or through reciprocal calling. For nesting, they use natural or woodpecker-drilled cavities in trees and saguaros, in addition to nest boxes. Eggs and young are vulnerable to snakes, raccoons and other animals, so these owls prefer cavities that are at least 1 foot deep inside with an entrance just a few inches wide. Inside, they lay up to seven oval, white eggs in March–May that hatch about a month later. Nestlings fledge at 4 to 5 weeks old, then remain with their parents for one or two months before dispersing to settle in a new place.



Western screech-owls vary in color and size, and numerous subspecies have been identified. They are gray, brown, gray-brown or (rarely) reddish-brown, with gray plumage occurring in desert owls and darker plumage in Northwest owls. Feathers on the back, breast and crown have dark streaks and light gray bars. The sides of the face have dark borders. Tail and wing feathers are barred, with dark streaks and whitish spots on the upper wing coverts.

These owls are 7 ½ to 10 inches long, average 4 to 7 ounces and have a wingspan of about 21 inches. Females are slightly bigger than males, and the species decreases in size from north to south in its range. They are similar to Eastern and whiskered screech-owls, but all have distinct voices.

and can be found throughout Arizona in the right habitat, although they are less common in the northeastern part of the state.

HABITAT: Western screech-owls are common in Arizona's woodlands, where they nest, roost and forage. Important habitat includes rivers, creeks and washes that support cottonwood, mesquite, willow and sycamore trees, as well as uplands with saguaro, paloverde, ironwood or pinyon pine and juniper forest. However, they avoid high coniferous forests and treeless areas. They also live in wooded city parks and will use nest boxes.

BIOLOGY: Diet differs between localities, but Western screech-owls will eat anything

STATUS: In 2004, Partners in Flight estimated the Western screech-owl population at 740,000 birds across its range. Declines have been noted in areas where loss of habitat to logging and development occur, and where barred owls have expanded their range into the Pacific Northwest.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: Maintaining quality habitat with numerous cavity nest sites is essential. This is a little-studied species. More information is needed on most aspects of its life history. 🦉

■ Kyle McCarty is a bald eagle biologist who has a deep interest in all birds, but primarily birds of prey. He joined the Arizona Game and Fish Department in 2005.