



## The Backyard

# Living with Otus

The adventure began on a sunny mid-October afternoon. Nothing on my “to do” list was as important as spending a few hours enjoying the back patio. With a cushion, iced tea, and a book, I settled in the shade below the latillas. After 15 minutes, I stopped reading. I was being watched. I looked up into the eyes of a western screech-owl.

The owl (*Megascops kennicottii*) was perched fewer than five yards away on a wisteria branch among the bright green leaves and dappled sunlight. It was the first western screech-owl we had seen on our property. I was torn between documenting the event and enjoying the gift of the owl’s presence. But I quietly went inside to grab my camera. I sat and took pictures; then, not satisfied, I crept closer. The owl seemed unfazed. I got the best photo while crouched on top of the patio table! I stayed for a couple of hours, reading

(not much) and watching the owl. Sometimes it watched me and sometimes its eyes drifted into slits. At dusk, the owl faced outward, silently watched whatever it is that owls watch, and eventually launched silently into the growing darkness. It did not return.

That might have been the end of the story, but I was intrigued. Where did it come from? I do not know if the owl was male or female; the sexes are not distinguishable by plumage. I broached the subject of putting up a nest box and my husband Dave pointed out that the owl would likely never return. However, he eventually succumbed to my “if we build it they will come” argument. In late October, I propped the ladder against our cottonwood, found the perfect spot facing southeast (and visible from our dining room window), and mounted a screech-owl nest box against the trunk. I climbed

down, and then we waited.

Eventually we stopped waiting, resigned to failure. But I had developed the habit of checking the box, looking for something other than an empty hole. By now, you have figured out that this was not, in fact, the end.

It was December 26 and a bright, frigid day. I stuck my head out the back door to see how cold it was and unconsciously glanced at the nest box. I almost tripped over the door-jamb—there was an owl sticking its head out of the hole!

Merry belated Christmas!

One reason to face a nest box to the southeast is that screech-owls are known to roost in them in the winter, and they perch in the opening on cold days to soak up the warmth of the sun.

And so it began. We started calling the owl “Otus,” which is the former screech-owl genus and lends itself more easily to nick-

names than does *Megascops*. For the rest of the winter we watched him. He sat in the entrance to the box ignoring us, even when I cheerfully said, “Hi Otus!” We tracked changing day length by when he left the box in the evening to forage. It didn’t take long for



**Western screech-owl.**

other birds in the neighborhood to discover the owl. I heard the greater roadrunner bill-rattling—it was perched on the patio wall looking right into the hole. Otus dropped to the bottom of the box. Other birds would regularly scold and mob the owl. As winter brightened toward spring, we began

to wonder whether Otus would find a mate; we’d seen no sign of a second owl. Our property, in sand/sage habitat up away from the Rio Grande, with only a few large trees, was not exactly prime habitat.

In early March, I noticed that when I passed near the nest box, Otus would get all “squinchy”—

RICK AND NORA BOWERS/KAC PRODUCTIONS

JANET M. RUTH

my term for alarmed screech-owl behavior, when they transform themselves from a fluffy ball with golden globes for eyes into a skinny streak of feathers with eyes squeezed shut in order to resemble a stick. I was surprised, because Otus had seemed accustomed to us. In late March, I was working in the front yard, when I had an unexplained urge to peer among the prickly branches of a scraggly Arizona cypress, and I came face-to-face with a screech-owl! It took me five seconds to remember that I had just seen one owl in the box. We had a pair of owls, and the mystery of “squinchy Otus” was solved—it was the female who was not yet accustomed to her un-feathered neighbors! We began calling the female “Ophelia” (“O” for owl ... literary ... Shakespearean ... yeah, I know).

The rest of the story is based on the two years since that day. Screech-owls are resident and will return annually to the same nest cavity. They are known to call regularly in late winter, but ours were practically silent. We saw little evidence of two birds at the same time. It seemed likely that their silence acknowledged the presence of the great horned owls that we occasionally observed. Because great horned owls will definitely snack on screech-owls, silence was golden—and safer. The second year, in early February, we observed an owl calling at

dusk from the nest box and nearby perches.

We were never able to confirm egg laying or incubation initiation dates. We would notice that there had not been an owl at the nest box entrance for a while and wonder if she was on eggs. The female usually lays three to five eggs and does all the incubation; she will leave the nest to defecate, cough up a pellet, or hunt for a short period. The literature indicates that the male feeds her during this period, although we never observed this. While the female incubated, Otus roosted gradually closer and closer to the nest box as fledging time approached.

In both years we confirmed hatching in late May. I stood in the chilly dawn darkness watching and listening, and, after a while, I heard the single soft toot of a screech-owl nearby. Suddenly an adult owl flew directly into the nest box and I heard high-pitched twittering—we had at least one hatchling! By early June, we observed the gray, fuzzy face of an owlet peering out of the nest-box hole. Otus roosted nearby, being harassed mercilessly by thrashers. At feeding time, the nestling hung out of the hole, bobbing up and down; a parent fluttered in front of the hole, transferring some tidbit of food to the owlet.

The owlets fledged at approximately the same time both years—a night in the first week of June. In

both years, we documented this when we saw an owlet perched tightly against the trunk of the cottonwood near the nest box in the morning. By back-calculating from the literature on incubation and fledging, eggs were probably laid the first week of April and hatching occurred in the first week of May.

That first year, we saw the single fledgling occasionally during the first week. Then it was gone (or unseen); we suspected that it had not survived. However, in late August a young owl was sitting on the edge of the birdbath, bill-snapping at me.

The rest of our experiences with fledglings are from the second year. On a windy morning after the owlet fledged, I saw it clinging to a cottonwood branch, in danger of being tossed from its safe harbor. In the afternoon, a white-tailed antelope squirrel trilled loudly from the patio. A first glance revealed an adult screech-owl perched on the light fixture, while the squirrel crouched below trilling, its tail quivering with indignation. Then I saw the real cause of the ruckus—the owl fledgling on the ground. Apparently, it had been blown to the ground (fortunately inside the patio walls). The owlet toddled on surprisingly long legs over to the base of the wisteria and crammed itself among the roots. And so, we were pleased with another successful owl nesting effort. Four days

## Screech-owl behavior is fascinating:

Screech-owls are “sit and wait” predators. Otus hunted from favorite perches. When he saw something interesting, he stood on tiptoe and swiveled his head in a kind of clockwise circle along the plane of his face, presumably to triangulate on the target.

One day I watched the owl repeatedly stretch its neck, open its bill wide, and close it. I was mystified, until something appeared in the owl's mouth, he leaned out of the box, and a pellet dropped to the ground. I'd seen many dried-up, regurgitated owl pellets, but had never seen one produced. I scurried out to retrieve the pellet; Dave noted that only a biologist would dream of such behavior. Anyway, it was still warm, a bit sticky, and had a sort of pungent-but-not-offensive smell. Thus began my project to collect pellets. Sometimes I could see tiny pieces of mouse bones. In summer, pellets were dry and crumbly, and made up primarily of beetle parts.

Once, I watched a large Cooper's hawk beneath the bird feeder devouring a mourning dove that she had snatched. When I looked up into the wisteria, I saw one of the owls cowering high up in the vegetation with its face turned into the corner. A small owl would make a nice meal for a Cooper's hawk, but this behavior presumably hid the part of an owl that might not blend into the shadows—its eyes. 🦉



**Western screech-owl adult and branching youngster (top).**

later, I counted two owl fledglings on the porch. Another three days later—miracle of miracles—there were three owlets and two adults! Owlets fledged simultaneously even though they do not hatch on the same day, so for eight days these other fledglings had been successfully hidden nearby. The owlets were significantly different sizes; one of “our” fledglings was really large and another was obviously the youngest of the clutch—probably a small male.

**For the rest of June the owls entertained us:**

One night as it got almost too dark to see, a fledgling curve-billed

thrasher innocently pecked about below the peanut feeder. I barely had time to murmur, “Oh, baby, you better find a safe roost for the night!” when one of the adult screech-owls took a pass at it. It was a miss, but there was a whole lot of *wheet*, *WHEET*-ing from thrasher parents and more unsuccessful passes by the screech-owl.

The owlets loved the birdbath. They perched on the edges of the bath, and the fluttering puffballs took turns walking around in the water. Occasionally one used the birdbath for its intended purpose, ruffling its feathers and thrashing about.

They perched on any remotely horizontal surface, often fluttering and teetering precariously.

When flying they appeared light on the wing, but the conclusion of these flights was often less than graceful. One landed with a crash in the middle of a large potted plant and clambered out with wings akimbo and feathers awry.

They practiced “hunting,” repeatedly attacking large pieces of unsuspecting bark mulch, which they carried about, and then attempted to dismember. Often these “victims” were found floating in the birdbath in the morning, apparently found wanting in the taste, digestibility, or nutrition department.

I watched one fly up to the clothesline and wobble there, inspecting the row of washed

plastic bags clipped there to dry. On another occasion, a fledgling flew to the clothesline where it nibbled at the clothespins, yanked at the waistband of my jeans, and pooped on my shorts!

The curve-billed thrashers kept close tabs on the screech-owls’ whereabouts. They seemed to take the owls’ presence as a personal affront, and we heard their angry *churr*-ing and *wheet-WHEET*s regularly. Occasionally there were pitched battles. A skirmish in the wisteria resulted in a thrasher crashing out of the tangle looking disheveled (but alive) and the adult owl dropping down to perch on a patio chair.

As August got hotter, the family regularly perched on various empty pots during the day, gular panting. It was too hot up in the wisteria with the sun baking above, and the shade beneath offered respite from the 90- to 100-degree Fahrenheit temperatures.

The fledglings’ juvenal plumage was fluffy and loose, and the most obvious difference from the parents was the horizontal whitish gray and black barring on the breast and crown. The young also had little in the way of feathered “horns,” although as they got older the fuzz stuck up a bit like ears.

We like to think that the parents had decided we were basically harmless. When the owls were perched in view on the back porch,

there were times that we could not avoid going out there. We quietly opened the back door, walked softly, kept our eyes cast down, and crept around the bushes to avoid threatening the owlets perched on the flowerpots. Occasionally, they “went squinchy,” puffed up their feathers, or snapped their bills, but mostly they just watched.

If one is a “neat-nik,” hosting an owl family is probably not a good idea. Between the poop coming out one end and the pellets out the other, they are messy. It’s easy to identify their favorite roost sites. We eventually gave up on keeping the porch floor and the grill cover clean, and the potted fig seedling looked a bit burned from the extra fertilizer. But the rewards far outweighed the disadvantages.

By mid-September, we realized that we had not seen the fledglings for a while, although we continued to see the parents. The young had likely dispersed to find good territories of their own. I told a friend nearby that this would be a good time to mount a screech-owl nest box, because there were at least three young western screech-owls looking for homes. ✎

*Janet M. Ruth is a research ornithologist with the U.S. Geological Survey; she has studied Rocky Mountain warblers, desert grassland birds, and bird migration in the U.S.–Mexico borderlands.*

JIM BURNS