

BACKYARD SCREECH OWL

In 2011, the Great South Bay Audubon Society (GSBAS) agreed to participate, with Audubon New York, in an American Kestrel nest box program. The GSBAS plan was to purchase six nest boxes and place them in locations with suitable habitat. Being a woodworker, I offered to build and donate one of the boxes, and I suggested the St. Charles Cemetery, in Farmingdale, Suffolk County, as a promising location. On a lark, I built two boxes, since the nest box specifications for American Kestrel and Eastern Screech-Owl are identical, and I had frequently heard screech owls around my yard.

Based on my own empirical data, the Eastern Screech-Owl appears secure in southwestern Suffolk County, where I do most of my birding. Nevertheless, the two state Breeding Bird Atlases show an apparent decline, and in my West Islip neighborhood, they went from confirmed in the 1985 Atlas to probable in the 2005 Atlas. Eastern Screech-Owl is not listed in the Draft 2015 New York State Wildlife Action Plan (NYS Department of Environmental Conservation), which, I suppose, is a good thing.

Coincidentally, the box we put up at St. Charles Cemetery was successful the first year, with five kestrel chicks fledging. That was the only successful box in the GSBAS program, and it has not been successful since. Conversely, I spent four summers evicting European Starlings from the owl box I placed in my yard. It was not an easy battle. The box is mounted on a steel pole about twelve feet high. I chose the location as far away from trees as possible to avoid squirrels and raccoons. Every week or ten days, I would set up a step ladder, open the box, and remove the starling nest. Fortunately, I was able to intervene in each case before any eggs had hatched. 2011 was the worst year, when I removed nine nests and a total of 18 eggs!

On March 9, 2015, I woke up and, while sitting on the edge of the bed putting on my watch, looked out the window and saw a straw-colored object protruding from the nest box entrance hole. I grabbed the resident window sill binoculars, my heart racing, and *voila*, an Eastern Screech-Owl. The owl would show its head periodically throughout the day, and we could usually watch her fly out at dusk.

On 13 March, just before dusk, I heard a single “toot” note from an Eastern Screech-Owl trill. Then another note. Then a double and a triple, progressing to a Morse code like pattern, and out flew the owl in the direction of the trill. I surmised that “my” owl was a female and the nearby triller was a male. More typical trilling was heard over the next several evenings, but I was unable to visually locate the serenading male in the waning twilight.

On 29 March, I decided to investigate the box interior. Wanting to cause minimal disturbance, I attached a light to my iPod, climbed up the ladder, put the iPod into the entrance hole and clicked away. The system worked perfectly, and I was thrilled to see three eggs in the box. Interestingly, this date corresponds to the earliest egg date listed for the species in Bull’s *Birds of the New York Area* (1964). Given that the first egg could not have been laid later than 27 March, we can infer yet another shift toward earlier breeding phenology among New York State birds. On 15 April, another climb up the ladder revealed that the egg count had increased to five (Fig 1). An examination of the nest on 27 April revealed that one owlet had hatched. This corresponded with a behavioral shift on the part of the adult female, and possibly the male. For example, on 28 April she flew out, as usual, but returned only three minutes later and entered the box, presumably with food. On 3 May, another photograph showed three chicks had hatched (Fig. 2). The frequency of the food deliveries made it more difficult to examine the box. On 4 May, I could hear two owls vocalizing at various times throughout the night.



Figure 1. Five E. Screech-Owl eggs in the nest box, 15 April 2015.



Figure 2. Three recently hatched owlets, 3 May 2015.

On 24 May, as I was sitting out on the deck at dusk, an owl poked its head out. But this was not an adult. Rather, it was a curious little downy, gray-colored chick (Fig. 3). On 27 May, I watched a screech owl feeding frenzy, with presumably both parents bringing food, mostly mice, to the nest at a rate of one per minute. At one point an adult brought a limp mouse and passed it to an awaiting owlet, who, with two heaves, swallowed it whole. That owlet appeared to be the “alpha” and it maintained its position in the entrance hole. A minute later, however, an adult arrived with another mouse and unceremoniously pushed the alpha back into the box to feed one of its siblings.

The following day, 28 May, there was an afternoon rainstorm. That brief storm must have driven earthworms to the surface, because they became the “special of the day”. The parents brought a steady diet of worms, along with plump, bright green caterpillars that I was unable to identify. Evidently, the alpha had a Gary Larson, Farside, moment, “Wait, these are worms! They’re feeding us worms!”, because about two hours after dusk it took off on its inaugural flight. I didn’t expect the owlets to be flight-capable upon leaving the nest cavity, since there is really not enough room in the box for them to fully stretch out their wings. The owlet proved me wrong, and flew about 30 feet to the top of an arbor in the yard. The owlet was quickly joined by both protective parents. This was the first time I had actually observed both red morph parents together. The following evening another owlet was observed leaving the box. This one had less refined flying skills, and scampered around on the grass, under the parents’ watchful eyes, finally disappearing into the gardens. Finally, on 30 May, an owlet was observed in the entrance hole most of the day. We never saw it fly out, but by 9 PM there was no activity at the box. As I write this, we have

not heard or seen any of the owls since 30 May, but we were certainly privileged to enjoy their company for 83 days and nights.

A subsequent examination and cleanout of the box revealed no sign of any occupation, so all five owlets must have fledged. I found several legs which appeared to have belonged to House Sparrows, and a few mouse tails. I never did find any pellets anywhere around the box or in the yard, which I found curious.

All in all, this was a great experience, and I look forward to a repeat performance next spring.

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Figure 3. Owlet's first look at the "real world", 24 May 2015.