Eastern Screech-owl

Natural History

Eastern Screech-owls are small owls, about 8" tall, and are often mistakenly thought to be baby Great-Horned Owls, whom they resemble. A Screech-owl's plumage is gray or reddish, thus the bird is referred to as "gray phase" or "red phase." They live in hardwood forests.

While nesting, the male catches food for both his mate and their offspring. The young owlets fight each other in the nest for food and may even kill and eat the youngest sibling if the food supply falls short. Screech-owls produce regurgitated food pellets twice a day. The pellets accumulate on the ground below the nest, so finding a pellet can be an indicator of a nest location above.

Nesting Habitat

Screech-owls live in forested parks and the edges of woodland clearings. They survive well in suburban neighborhoods with trees and use the spacious lawns as hunting grounds. Even though Screech-owls eat European Starlings, starlings may displace Screech-owls from nest boxes and cavities. The owls do not build any nest inside the box. Instead, the mother lays her 2-6 eggs on whatever is in the bottom of the cavity. Screech-owls are "secondary nesters" which means they do not excavate their own nest cavities but instead require a nest box, natural cavity or an old woodpecker cavity to nest.

Box Location

Trees are the key nesting habitat for Screech-owls. If the nest tree is located in a woodland, there is a chance squirrels will take over the nest.

Box Installation

Hang the nest box 10'-30' off the ground on a tree underneath a tree limb, along a woodland edge, and 100' away from the next nearest Screech-owl nest box. Add 2"-3" of wood shavings to the bottom of the box.

Nest Box Dimensions

The entrance hole is 3" round and placed 9" above the floor of the box. The box is 14" deep with a floor area 10" wide by 11- ¾" tall. Create a series of horizontal saw grooves just under the entrance hole, both outside and inside the box to act as a ladder for the young to climb out of the box. The 3" entrance hole will require you to frequently monitor to see if starlings are taking over the nest box.

Additional Notes

It helps fledglings to have a nearby branch to fly to when they leave the nest for the first time, as long as the branch does not obstruct the entrance. The Screech-owl parents require a clear flight path to the box. A second box can be put within the territory, but at least 100' away, in case first clutch fails. The young are fed by their parents for 8-10 weeks. Fox Squirrels, American Kestrels and Flickers will,

American Kestrel, Screech-Owl, Northern Saw-whet Owl, Boreal Owl, Bufflehead

SUPPLIES NEEDED:

Use raw pine or cedar. Do not paint or treat with a wood preservative.

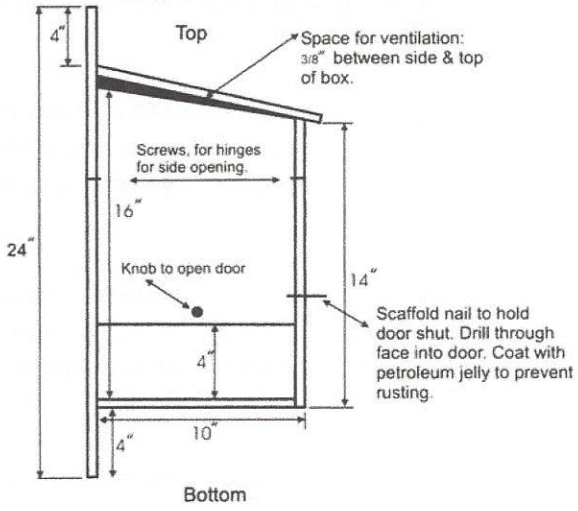
An outside perch is not necessary and may attract other species to the box.

Use 1-5/8" galvanized deck screws for the box.

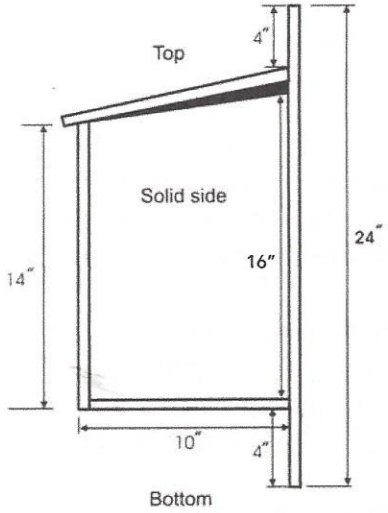
You can place a perch inside (using cutout from entrance) about three inches below entrance hole.

Place 2" of coarse wood shavings (not sawdust) in bottom of box, each year before nesting season.

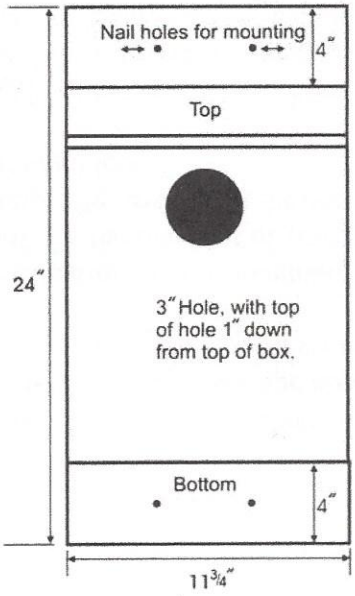
SIDE VIEW WITH DOOR



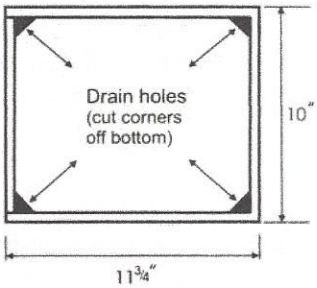
SIDE VIEW OTHER SIDE OF BOX



FRONT VIEW OF BOX



BOTTOM OF BOX



Bottom is inset into sides of box.

TheCornellLab NestWatch

Report your nesting birds to NestWatch.org

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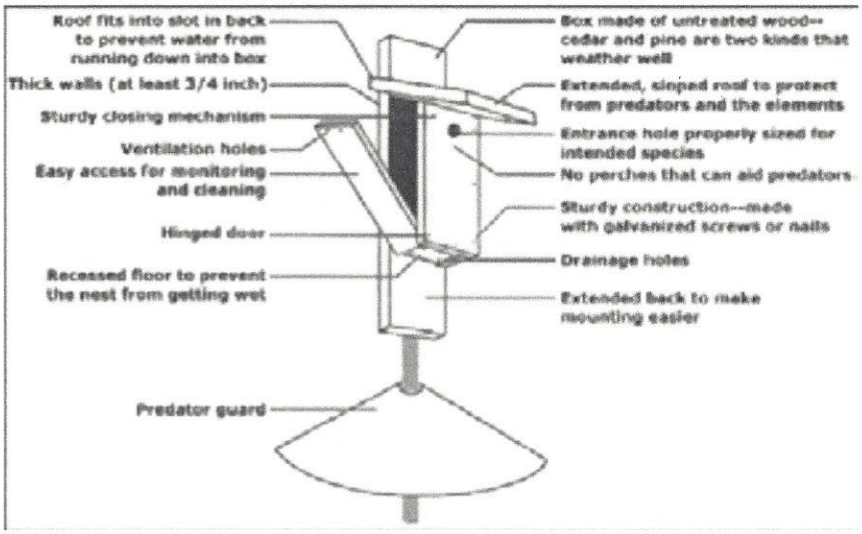
General Hints for All Nest Boxes

Local habitat is the primary factor determining which animals will utilize backyard nest boxes. Nest boxes can be substitute homes for cavity dwelling species that typically build their nests in tree trunks- like woodpeckers, squirrels, raccoons, some songbirds, and owls.



Materials: Nest boxes of untreated and unpainted wood are more attractive to birds and mammals and less toxic. Cedar, cypress, redwood, or pine are good choices. Nails, woodscrews and hinges must be rustproof. Painting boxes decreases the camouflage of the box, drawing in predators.

Perches: Perches on songbird houses create problems for our native species. Perches make it easier for predators to enter the box. Only non-native species of birds use perches, so boxes without perches are preferred.

Ease of exit: By adding rough or grooved interior walls to the nest box, fledglings and young animals can exit more easily when it is time.

Warm nest: By using lumber that is at least 3/4 of an inch thick, you provide insulation for young mammals and birds. Box should open from the side or top for maintenance and cleaning.

Dry nest: The interior of a nest box needs to be dry in order to keep young animals warm. A slightly slanted roof that overhangs the entrance hole keeps rain from entering the box. By constructing boxes with the floor recessed at least 1/4 inch up into the walls, water will not seep into the box floor. Drainage holes drilled in the floor allow animal waste and any other moisture to drain from the box. By cleaning out the box every year in fall, you prevent the bottom from rotting.

Critical nest box features: Make sure that your box incorporates features preferred by the particular species you hope to attract. These features include the double thick entrance hole size and extended roof to deter predators like squirrels. The height at which the box is posted, and the type of habitat surrounding the box need to need to match the desired species. Invest in a functional, rather than ornamental, nest box.

Tree care: Aluminum nails and screws are less damaging to trees when installing boxes on trees. Wiring boxes to trees can girdle and kill the tree.

Other nest box plans are available from:

1) Cornell Lab of Ornithology's website http:/ /nestwatch.org/ or http:/ /allaboutbirds.org.
2) http://www.wildlifehc.org/new/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/Artificial-Nesting-Structures.pdf
3) http://wdfw.wa.gov/living/projects/index.html
4) http://www.tnwatchablewildlife.org/woodworkingforwildlife.cfm
5) http://www.csu.edu/cerc/researchreports/documents/WoodProjectsforIllinoisWildlife.pdf