

OWL FACT SHEET

OWLS in New Jersey

Owls are both admired by some and feared by others, and they evoke perceptions that are quite mixed, from spooky and evil to fearless and wise. Hopefully this factsheet will shed some light on the secretive lives of New Jersey's owls and dispel some of the misinformation spread over the centuries. This false information was no doubt developed as people tried to "fill in the information blanks" that have been the rule concerning these the most secretive and mysterious of our birds of prey.

There are eight owl species that live, breed or visit New Jersey on a regular basis. They are:

SPECIES	STATUS IN NJ	HEIGHT	WINGSPAN	HABITAT
Great horned owl	*sedentary	18½-25"	48-60"	Mixed
Screech owl	sedentary	7-10"	18-24"	Woodlands-D
Barred owl	sedentary	16-23"	38-45"	Woodlands-D/C
Barn owl	sedentary/migratory	14-20"	40-45"	Meadow
Long-eared owl	migratory	13-16"	36-42"	Woodlands-C
Short-eared owl	migratory	13½-17"	39-44"	Meadows
Saw-whet owl	migratory	7-8½"	18-21"	Woodlands-C
Snowy owl	Winter visitor only	21-28"	50-65"	Tundra/Meadow

* Sedentary means the owls are non-migratory and year round residents.

Woodlands-D=deciduous forest, Woodlands-C=Coniferous forest, Woodlands-D/C=both

Owls all share some rather remarkable adaptations that make them adept and efficient hunters. Most are nocturnal and hunt at night while short-eared owls hunt during twilight hours and are called crepuscular. Snowy owls are diurnal, that is, active during the day.

All owls have very prominent eyes that face forward, which provides them with overlapping fields of vision. This overlap provides "depth perception" and allows owls to pin-point the location of their prey by sight. In addition, vision cells are composed of two types, rods and cones depending on their shape. Cone vision cells are useful during daylight hours; rod cells are used at night. Owls are equipped with many more rod vision cells in their eyes than humans enabling them to see much

better in low light. Unlike human eyes, owl eyes are fixed in their sockets and cannot move. They manage to overcome that limitation by being able to rotate their neck a full 270 degrees and bring new meaning to the phrase... "Their head is on a swivel"!

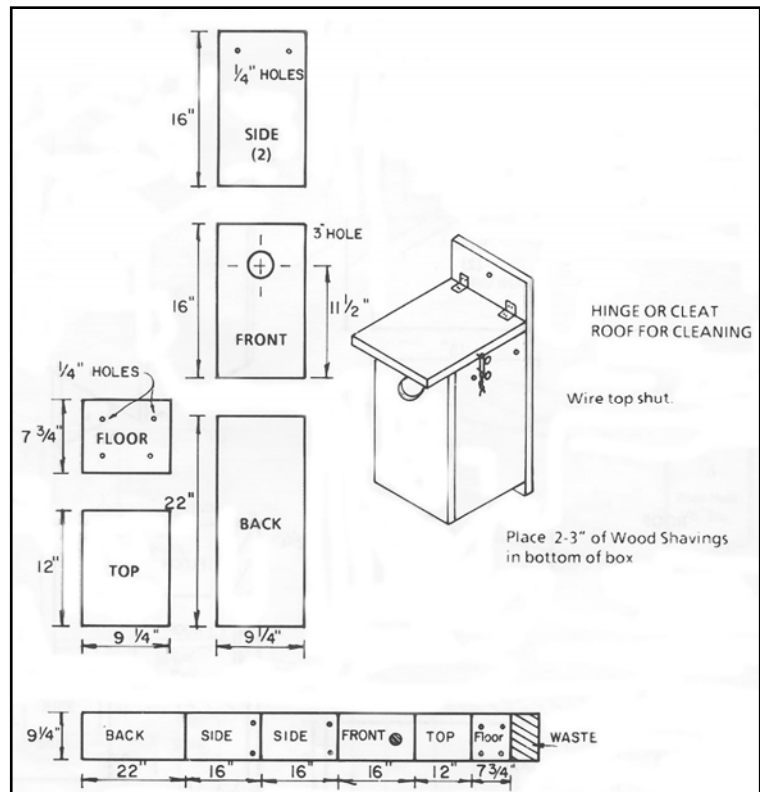
While some owls like the Great horned and screech owls appear to have "ears", these are actually just tufts of feathers that have nothing to do with hearing. Owls do have excellent hearing and the ears are located on the side of their heads. Owls have what is known as asymmetrical ear placement, which means that one ear is higher on the skull than the other. This allows the owls, through head movement, to triangulate prey location by sound and is another method owls use to hunt effectively in low light conditions.

OWL HOUSES

The plans shown on the right are for the Eastern Screech owl but are also suitable for American kestrel. Screech owls regularly use these types of boxes if habitat conditions are right.

Screech owls like open mixed deciduous/conifer type woodlands. Eggs are laid between March and May and hatch in 26-28 days. The young will fledge in about 4 weeks but beware! Mom and Dad Screech owl can be aggressively protective of their young to those that venture too close to the nest box.

Screech owls are opportunistic hunters that will make do with whatever food source is available including, mice, rats, shrews, voles, snakes, fish, insects and even earthworms.



For More Information Sources on Owls:

The Owl Pages: http://www.owlpages.com/n_american_owls.html

The Raptor Center:

www.ahc.umn.edu/ahc_content/colleges/vetmed/Depts_and_Centers/Raptor_Center/index.cfm

Information on Owls: This web based informational clearinghouse has "Everything Owl" including graphics, owl house construction, facts and figures. <http://www.rci.rutgers.edu/~au/owl.htm>

New Jersey's Owls, Len Soucy's excellent book on owl species in NJ, Published by The Raptor Trust, 1390 White Bridge Road Millington, NJ 07946