

FIRST FULLY DOCUMENTED NESTING OF EASTERN SCREECH-OWL IN SASKATCHEWAN

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Christopher I.G. Adam, has demonstrated that the Eastern Screech-Owl is a regular resident along the Souris River in southeastern Saskatchewan, and has been present at least since the 1920s.¹ Using tapes of Screech-Owl calls, Adam and Fitzgerald saw or heard screech-owls at 17 of 53 stops between Estevan and the United States boundary in 1986. Most of the responding owls were near villages, haystacks or feedlots.¹

Although territorial pairs have also been found in other valleys, including the Qu'Appelle Valley near Katepwa, Wascana Creek near Regina, and Moose Jaw Creek within the Moose Jaw city limits, sometimes near suitable hollow trees, there is only one record of definite breeding success anywhere in Saskatchewan, an undated record of a barely-fledged young "extracted from a chimney" near Moose Jaw by Bob Kreba in 1979.² There have been successful nestings documented only 8 and 14 miles east of the Saskatchewan boundary, at Lyleton and Reston, in southwestern Manitoba.¹

In May, 1987, Doug Cole located an Eastern Screech-Owl nest in the park beside the river in Moose Jaw. When Dale Hjertaas visited the nest he obtained only an imperfect view of the adult flitting away. He felt identification was 98% certain -- but on a second visit the nest had been deserted and the projected banding visit for 6 June was cancelled.

When Bob Finley, Conservation Officer with the Saskatchewan Department of Parks, Culture and Recreation was transferred from North Battleford where he regularly found Great Horned Owl nests for me, to Estevan, he asked me what owls I would travel that far to band. The answer was easy: Eastern Screech-Owls. I sent Bob the plans for screech-owl boxes in the fall of 1987. By February he put up 12 boxes along the Souris River in areas where Christopher Adam had found singing males previously in previous years. Bill Connely of Estevan helped Bob build and erect several of the boxes, while Garth MacFarlane south of Glen Ewen, assisted with another two.

All boxes were nailed to Manitoba Maples (*Acer negundo*), 8 to 12 feet above the ground, in the Souris River Valley. The boxes were placed in three groupings. Group 1: at about two-mile intervals between Estevan and Roche Percee. Group 2: three boxes each at Roche Percee. Group 3: five boxes at one-mile intervals north of the point where the Souris River enters the United States, south of Glen Ewen.

Bob phoned me at the end of March to report that eight of the boxes had shown signs of activity, with four definite nesting attempts by screech-owls. I had once banded an Eastern Screech-Owl one caught in the garden of Constable Hatch on Fifth Avenue in Yorkton on November 1945. Prospects looked good to add to my list of nestling raptors banded. As it happened 1988 proved the most nestling raptor banding day

ever — 16 species. Could I come
own Friday morning, Bob enquired?

Marc Bechard had just flown in from
se, Idaho, to help us trap adult
preys on their nests at Loon Lake that
weekend. I hastily arranged to take
day off. After work on Thursday,
c and I drove down to Holkham
n at Dilke. We got up early on Friday
ning, 3 June. Joined by our bed-and-
akfast hostess, Margaret Belcher, we
ved on Bob Finley's doorstep by 8
and began the rounds in his truck.

ight of Bob's 12 nest boxes were
upied, but not all by screech-owls.
amily of Gray Squirrels was being
ed in one Group 1 box, while there
e two adult Gray Squirrels in a
up 2 box. European Starlings were
ng several young in a Group 3 box,
ough red-phase screech-owl
ers were also in the box.

One Group 1 box had the apparent
beginnings of a screech-owl nest,
deserted early. Another box with a red
phase adult screech-owl was predated,
possibly by a Raccoon, though this is by
no means certain. Two owl pellets were
still present in the box.

Three screech-owl nests were suc-
cessful. We captured and banded a
grey-phase adult in the box closest to
Estevan, and also banded her four
downy young. The adult screech-owl
looked at us sleepily when we moved
her into the bright sunlight for a
photograph. A gorgeous pattern of bar-
ring on her soft feathers was unlike any
other species of owl (Figure 1). The nest
nearest Roche Percee also had a grey-
phase adult and four young banded
(Figure 2). The third successful nest,
about 14 miles east of the Northgate
customs post, had four young, three



Fig 1. Bob Finley opening
h-Owl box, Souris river near
Estevan, 3 June 1988 C.S. Houston



Figure 2. Adult grey-phase Eastern
Screech-Owl, near Estevan, 3 June
1988 C.S. Houston



Downy nestling grey-phase Eastern Screech-Owls, near Estevan, 3 June 1988
C.S. Houlihan

grey-phase and the only definite red-phase bird of the twelve.

Each of the successful nests was within a half mile of a cattle feedlot, corroborating Chris Adam's observations on this point. No doubt mice are more available in such locations. Although the sample is small, further nest box erection should be targeted for valley trees near feedlots.

Bernice Finley's zucchini loaf provided a mouth-watering snack as we paused briefly to listen to a singing Rose-breasted Grosbeak and appreciate the magnificent view of the Souris River valley. We left Estevan about 2 p.m., dropped Margaret Belcher off at Bethune, picked up our Osprey crew in Saskatoon, and carried on to Loon lake that evening. The Regina-Estevan trip via Dilke was over 460 km each way, we travelled close to 200 km in over 5 hours in the Souris Valley area, and we had another 325 km to cover to reach Loon Lake on Friday evening. Over

1400 kilometers of travel, but worth it. Truly, June 3 was a day never forget. We had banded 12 young and 2 adult Eastern Screech-owls and recorded photographically the fully documented nestings of this species in Saskatchewan.

Acknowledgements

I owe a debt of gratitude to Bob Bernice Finley, Bill Connely and MacFarlane, and to Chris Adam's surveys which pinpointed the sites for successful nest box placement.

NOTE: In 1989 only one pair was successful with three nestlings born south of Glen Ewen on 11 June.

¹ ADAM, C.I.G. 1989. Eastern Screech-Owl in Saskatchewan and adjacent provinces. *Blue Jay* 47(3):164-188.

² HARRIS, W.C. 1980. Prairie Provinces region [Autumn 1979]. *Am. Birds* 3:174.