



Juvenile screech owls in nesting box



Light coming through entrance hole to nesting box lights eye of incubating female screech owl

*My Saucer-Eyed Tenants*

For over ten years I have had a bit of an unusual relationship with some tenants on my property. This past week there were hints that my little lodgers might be reappearing to raise their families here. Clay Sutton and Jimmy Dowdell were noting the first sighting on premises. They have been conducting bird censuses on the river for over 30 years for CU Maurice River, and they reported having seen a face looking out of one of the apartments.

I fumbled to get my phone out of my jacket pocket to reconnect with my boarders. My getting my phone out while dressed in winter wear resembles WC Fields trying to make change for a dollar. "Drat the darned technology," I muttered. It turned out that the security camera in that apartment was on the fritz and couldn't be viewed on my phone. In fact the camera was unplugged. I raced to the outlet and still no good. So I went to check the box 200 feet up the wooded road. Ah, there she was, a tawny feathered resident: my lovely little screech owl. Okay, so no, I don't own an owl, but in my heart she is *my little sweetie*. I'm thinking this is last year's female.

And the chicks look like little puffballs, but can resemble saucer-eyed stuffed toys, or homely old men, or sleepy drunks. I kid you not.

Still, for me there is nothing lovelier or cuter than a tiny little adult screech owl. Their facial expressions range from evil to an innocent sweetness. Our current occupant is red or rufous vs. a gray morph color, decked out in a butterscotch gown. We are coming off the Oscars, so just go with it. And in that adorable little package is a terrorist at heart, by necessity. When you're 6-9 inches tall and weigh 4-8.5 oz you've got to be tough to provide for your family.

For the parents, thankfully baby screech owls are not picky eaters. They can capture all matter of things: fish, frogs, worms, rabbits, moles, squirrels, mice, crayfish, insects, and more. Unfortunately for nature lovers they are especially fond of smaller birds, too.

Being cavity nesters, screech owls are reliant on the holes made by woodpeckers or on housing provided by people. That's where my husband and I come in. And with the help of unreliable technology often I get to fulfill some of my voyeuristic propensities from March to May. The erratic aspects bring on all manner of imaginative vocabulary while my patience dwindles, as happened with the dysfunctional camera in the box where Clay and Jim observed a sunbathing occupant.

Generally the birds will pair up in March, when the river and its wooded banks resound with the trill and whining calls of the courting owls, phonetically described as "Wheooo, woo, woo, woee." And if things go well, in April or May there can be a clutch of 2-6 eggs, in our cases 2-3. We have seen chicks in May that fledge in June. This can vary but basically incubation is a month, and nesting before fledging consumes another month. The eggs are about the size of a quarter and the chicks are covered in downy white feathers at birth.

One March after the cameras were installed I was like a kid in a candy store, filled with anticipation. During the day our occupants mostly slept. But when my 60+ -year-old kidneys announced their 3 a.m. needs I would sneak a peak into the secret world of screech owls. Their loving little shenanigans rival *Sleepless in Seattle* (darned Oscars). Being married to me means you may have to wake up to giggling at 3 a.m. Honestly, they snuggle and talk up a storm, at least when the sound works and I can hear them.

I've actually found out some interesting things that are different from my readings or at least my interpretation of

owl natural history. Yes, the male stays with the nest, but with our owls not "in" the nest. He apparently keeps a close watch from the outside. And when he delivers food it resembles a brief melee of feathers. Then when he departs you see what meal has been delivered – but this is often not for those with delicate constitution. The camera's position makes our tenant's head look a bit out of scale, sort of a bobble-head effect. And that combined with a small snake pleases some but clearly not all viewers.

Maybe we will have some fun with future reports but for now it's all about anticipation. After all, anything might happen in Nature Around Us.