

Along The Trail

by
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Three species of owls have been seen in Santa Cruz, the horned owl, the barn owl and the screech owl. Smallest of the three, the screech owl is shorter than a robin. Because of its ferocity, this little brute, however, has been aptly termed the feathered wildcat. Not only does it attack and kill gophers, and sometimes birds as large as itself, but it has been known to display fearlessness toward humans, sometimes striking at the face and head.

Screech owls came to Natural Bridges park in June, or maybe they were here before that time, for when they came there was a family composed of four young ones and two adults. Signs of their activities preceded the first observation of them. We had many moths about the light on the office porch. Some of these were the large, colorful sphinx moths, and we had been collecting some for display purposes.

But each morning when we went out to do our collecting, it appeared that we had a competitor, for all we found was wings. Something was eating the moths, but we didn't know what. The mystery was solved when one morning we found four sleepy young screech owls huddled together on a tree limb in front of the office.

The photograph is of one of the adults and was taken sometime previous to the finding of the young. Adult screech owls possess "ears," or tufts of feathers, and most drawings in books show them with their ears up. They can, and often do, however, lower these ears and flatten them against the head.

In the east there are two color phases of the screech owl—some are red, while others are gray. In California ours are all the same, being gray with brownish markings.

The nest is often in holes in trees. These may be either natural cavities where the wood has rotted, or may be holes excavated by flickers. Sometimes screech owls lay eggs in wood rat nests or in bird boxes put up by some land owner who appreciates their value as a "mouser."

The list of prey items of the screech owl is a long one. Mainly they feed upon small rodents, as mice, gophers and rats. Insects, especially large night-flying moths, are eaten in large quantity, and such things as beetles, snails, salamanders and snakes are taken. An occasional small bird is caught, but a study of the screech owl's diet seems to indicate a preference for English sparrows and house finches, two species which often become a nuisance about buildings. The screech owl is highly beneficial to man.

There is nothing in the repertoire of this bird to suggest a screech, so that the name is a misnomer. A soft, tremulous trill, seemingly far away, is the most commonly heard note. Young owls hiss when disturbed, and most owls have a peculiar habit of snapping the bill when angry. This produces a "crackling" sound.

Juvenile owls out of the nest sleep during daylight hours. They are usually found standing in a bunch with their heads pressed together. Most owls do not see well in daylight and usually choose a dark place to spend the day. Caves, holes in trees or rocks, dark attics or densely-foliaged trees are favorite places. The screech owl sometimes perches on a horizontal limb next to the tree trunk. He closes his eyes, elongates his body and camouflages himself to look like a stub of a limb.

They slumber most of the day and at nightfall begin their rounds of the orchards and fields, gliding silently through the night on large, broad wings. Their sense of hearing, and of sight, is acute so that they are very effective at capturing mice and other small creatures.

Most birds finish laying an entire egg clutch before applying body heat and incubation. Not so the owls; incubation begins with the laying of the first egg. The young are born at succeeding intervals. This results in a family built along the lines of stair steps.

The barn owl, which often lays seven or eight eggs, will have the oldest nestling a week or more advanced in age, and, consequently, in size. The last young ones usually have a rough time surviving for the older ones often seize them and devour them in the nest.

Not nice habits! But very useful birds if we are bothered with mice. Owls swallow, with their food, a lot of fur, bone and other indigestible material. This matter is rolled into a ball in the stomach and regurgitated. Under every owl roost we will find these pellets, which offer real proof of the owl's worth. Encased in these pellets are numerous skulls and the jaw bones of gophers and mice.

Feathered Wildcat



This screech owl may look meek with its wide-eyed stare, but naturalists report the tiny bird, little larger than a robin, will attack and kill gophers and

mice and sometimes birds as large as itself and is not averse to tackling humans if the occasion demands.

Officer Makes Double Check, Gets His Man

Persistence is a virtue in police work, where double-checking often produces twice as much success as just plain checking.

Officer L. V. Burris and a certain green panel truck bumped into each other—figuratively, that is—twice yesterday morning before the policeman nailed the man he was looking for.

Burris first checked the truck after city police were notified that one Clifford Anderson, wanted by the Santa Cruz and Fresno county sheriffs for parole violation, was believed to be in Santa Cruz.

The driver, a local resident, showed his credentials and satisfied Burris that he was not the guilty party. He was released.

An hour or so later, Burris spotted the same truck on West Cliff drive. Same driver—but this time he had a companion.

That's when Burris decided a little double-check was in order. He approached the truck and asked the second man's name.

"Martinelli," was the reply. But "Martinelli" could produce no identification.

"What's your first name?" asked Burris. "Clifford," the man said.

"Sure you're not Clifford Anderson?" asked Burris archly. "Well . . . yes," said Clifford ("Martinelli") Anderson.

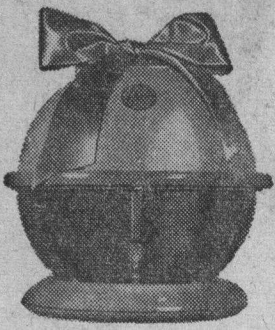
Anderson, 23, was booked into county jail on the parole violation charge. The driver was not held.

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