



# WESTERN SCREECH OWL PROJECT

## THE WESTERN SCREECH OWL

This beautiful small owl with yellow eyes, and ‘ear tufts’ was once widespread in southern coastal BC, but has experienced a dramatic decline in numbers in the last 20 years, and is now considered a species of special concern.

While the spread of barred owls, which hunt screech owls, and loss of habitat to forestry are thought to be factors in their decline, researchers are still trying to figure out the full story of what is happening to this little owl and what might be done to help them thrive once more.

## FOCI, SCREECH OWLS & THE DISCOVERY ISLANDS

In 2021, FOCI was awarded Habitat Stewardship Program funding to support a new Screech Owl research project on Cortes, and more research on Read, Maurelle and Sonora Islands. This research is guided by Pacific Megascops (Screech Owl) Research Alliance and Ministry biologists, who are excited to tackle this work in the Discovery

“The research FOCI is spearheading is the first of its kind in the Discovery Islands. I think this is just the start of some very exciting work on some of our most charismatic and least understood local wildlife.”

—Jeremiah Kennedy, Joint Founder PMRA

Islands, in order to fill a large gap in their understanding of Western Screech Owl distribution in the region.

These islands represent a unique set of ecosystems, sitting as they do at the juncture between the Sunshine Coast and Vancouver Island. It is hoped that findings here will help expand our understanding of habitat preferences for screech owls in the rest of coastal BC as well.

## SEARCHING FOR OWLS

Working with researchers, we have identified areas that have most potential as habitats for these owls on Cortes. These are mostly on the north of the island, including Carrington Bay Regional Park and ha̱amun (Von Donop) Marine Provincial Park.

During February and March 2022, local biologists are surveying for Screech Owls in these areas, using two kinds of surveys. Firstly, we will do call-play-back (CPB) surveys at night, playing screech owl calls at set intervals on predetermined

routes, then listening for responses from any owls that might be in the area. Volunteers on Read, Sonora and Maurelle islands will be carrying out similar surveys and we are excited to compare notes to see what they find.

We will also be putting up Autonomous Recording Units (ARUs) in a number of carefully selected locations on Cortes. These units will record sounds over a period of two weeks. The data we collect will be analyzed by Ministry biologists to identify screech owl calls and any other species that can be heard.

We know Screech owls live on Cortes, but their numbers have dwindled in recent years. There are historic records from the Gorge Harbour area—this picture shows David Edwards holding a Screech Owl at Channel Rock in the 1980’s. The most recent confirmed record was in 2017 from the northern wilds of the island.



Photo courtesy of Cortes Island Museum and Archives



Local biologist, Sabina Leader-Mense, doing a call-play-back survey, listening for Screech Owls.

## A WORLD OF SOUND

The bonus of doing this work is that we get a full ‘soundscape’ of the areas we record. From these recordings, we will get a better sense of which species are living in the more remote parts of the island, such as wolves, or species at risk like the Northern Goshawk.

If we are lucky enough to track down some Screech Owls, we will also get to find out who they live with—perhaps species like the pacific chorus frog, who is thought to be a favourite food.

## THE BIGGER PICTURE

The Pacific Megascops Research Alliance works to further our understanding of Western Screech Owls, by identifying critical habitat areas and determining causes of widespread declines. They are collaborating with provincial and federal government biologists, Birds Canada, WildResearch, and FOCI to complete surveys across coastal BC.

The Province of BC also supports research to determine how Screech Owl populations have responded to habitat loss and Barred Owl invasions.

## WHAT’S NEXT?

We hoping to receive more funding from the Habitat Stewardship Program for 2022-24. If we’re successful, we intend to carry out follow up surveys on any Screech Owl findings from this year. We’ll also get to work with island residents to protect suitable habitat areas, install nest boxes, and host workshops and talks. We’ll have lots of opportunities for folks to get involved, learn more about Western Screech Owls, and find ways to help them thrive in our community!

## YOU CAN HELP!

If you have any memories of Screech owls on Cortes, or if you think you may have seen or heard one, we would love to hear from you.

Send us a message anytime!  
friendsofcortes@gmail.com

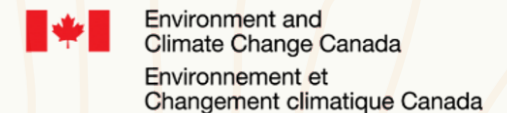
Find out more about this little owl on our website at [friendsofcortes.org](http://friendsofcortes.org)

## DID YOU KNOW?

The Western Screech Owl doesn’t screech! It has a ‘bouncing ball’ song, a series of 5 – 9 short, whistled hoots, speeding up ping-pong-ball fashion towards the end.

## PROJECT PARTNERS

This project was undertaken with the financial support of Environment & Climate Change Canada, BC Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations & Rural Development, Pacific Megascops, Friends of Cortes Island Society, and volunteers from Read, Sonora and Maurelle islands.



We are also looking forward to working with the Children’s Forest, the Cortes General Forestry Partnership, BC Parks, and SRD Parks, as the project develops.