

Searching for the Western Screech Owl



This beautiful small owl with yellow eyes and “ear tufts” used to be widespread in southern coastal BC, but their numbers have declined dramatically in the last 20 years. They are now considered a *Species of Special Concern*.

Before our research began, the most recent record of a screech owl on Cortes was from 2017. They had also been heard on Read, Maurelle, and Sonora Islands, but less and less each year. Two likely causes of their decline are habitat loss due to deforestation, as well as the spread of barred owls which hunt screech owls. There is still a lot to learn about this little owl and what we can do to help them recover.

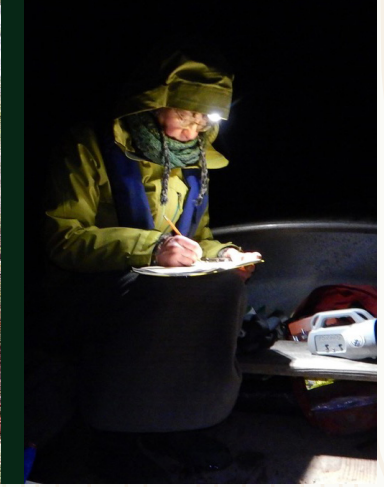
Screech owl project takes flight

Our goal was to search for screech owls on Cortes, Read, Maurelle, and Sonora Islands, as well as to work with community members to build and install owl nesting boxes. We partnered with Pacific Megascops (screech owl) Research Alliance and government biologists who were excited to find out about owls in the unique ecosystems of the Discovery Islands.

We put up *Autonomous Recording Units* in carefully chosen locations around Cortes, Read, Maurelle, and Sonora Islands. These units are programmed to record sounds at night, when owls are most likely to call, and were left in place for 2-4 weeks. On Cortes we also did “*call-play-back*” surveys at night, playing screech owl calls at set intervals on routes around the island and listening for any responses from owls in the area. We surveyed older growth forests and checked near wetlands and streams where screech owls like to live.



Autumn Barrett-Morgan (Monitoring Technician) sets up Autonomous Recording Units



Sabina Leader Mense (Biologist) doing a call-play-back survey from a boat

What we found out about screech owls

Our research team confirmed there is limited habitat available for screech owls in the Discovery Islands due to the impacts of forestry. But, the good news is that we did find at least one western screech owl in the northern wilds of Cortes. This area has pockets of old growth and snags which provide good nesting habitat, as well as seasonal creeks which support prey such as frogs. It's possible that we will find other screech owls by surveying more of these kinds of microhabitats.

The research team also mapped out the capability of existing habitats to support more screech owls if they were allowed to reach their natural full growth without further disturbance. In areas with low suitability but higher capability, we could help by installing more nest boxes to make up for the lack of natural nesting cavities.

Read the full report at friendsofcortes.org

Homes for owls

We installed 25 nesting boxes in carefully selected locations across the Discovery Islands. These boxes were made by friends and neighbours at community workshops. Volunteers will keep their eyes on the boxes, looking for nesting success. *Photo below: Nest box workshop Read Island*



Did you know—the western screech owl doesn't actually screech!

It has a "bouncing ball" song, a series of 5–9 short, whistled hoots, speeding up like a ping-pong ball at the end.



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Collecting soundscapes

While we worked, we recorded ‘soundscapes’ of our survey areas. In these recordings, we heard many barred owl calls, another possible reason for why screech owls were absent. We also heard other Species at Risk including northern pygmy owls and marbled murrelets. These soundscapes are valuable records of these vulnerable species.

Meet our partners

The Pacific Megascops Research Alliance is working to understand western screech owls, identifying critical habitat and uncovering the causes of widespread declines. They collaborate with provincial and federal government biologists and organizations like Birds Canada, WildResearch and FOCI to do surveys across coastal BC.

“The research that 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, Pacific Megascops Research Alliance



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Ministry of
Water, Land and
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Thank you to our funders, our volunteers from Read, Sonora, and Maurelle islands, and to BC Parks, Strathcona Regional District Parks, the Cortes Forestry General Partnership, Mosaic Forest Management, and other landholders for allowing us to access lands they manage for surveys and nest boxes.

Have you heard a western screech owl?

Let us know if you have any memories of screech owls on Cortes or if you think you may have seen or heard one. Contact FOCI at 250-935-0087 or friendsofcortes@gmail.com.

Find out more about this little owl at friendsofcortes.org