

Eastern Screech-Owl Catches Fish By Wading

Author(s): Vladimir Dinets

Source: The Wilson Journal of Ornithology, 123(4):846-847. 2011.

Published By: The Wilson Ornithological Society

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1676/11-056.1>

URL: <http://www.bioone.org/doi/full/10.1676/11-056.1>

BioOne (www.bioone.org) is a nonprofit, online aggregation of core research in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences. BioOne provides a sustainable online platform for over 170 journals and books published by nonprofit societies, associations, museums, institutions, and presses.

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Web site, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at www.bioone.org/page/terms_of_use.

Usage of BioOne content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non-commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

The Wilson Journal of Ornithology 123(4):846–847, 2011

Eastern Screech-Owl Catches Fish By Wading

Vladimir Dinets¹

ABSTRACT.—I observed an Eastern Screech-Owl (*Megascops asio*) wading to catch fish in a small lake in the Everglades, Florida, USA. This fishing technique has not been recorded previously in this species or in other small owls. Received 11 March 2011. Accepted 20 May 2011.

Eastern Screech-Owls (*Megascops asio*) are known to capture fish by flying from a perch or hopping from shore (Prescott 1985, Gehlbach 1994), but apparently have not been observed wading to catch fish. I observed an Eastern Screech-Owl catching fish by wading at Clearwater Slough in Big Cypress National Preserve, Florida during a 6-year study of crocodylian behavior that included extensive night-time observations.

OBSERVATIONS

Clearwater Slough (25° 47' 19" N, 81° 06' 00" W) is a body of water ~500 m² in size, up to 2 m deep, and is surrounded by seasonally flooded bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) forest. It has water current for most of the year but is stagnant in spring, when water levels are lowest. I conducted observations at the slough from 1 April until 15 May 2006, 3 days a week, from 1 hr before sunset until 3 hrs after sunrise, from a car parked on a bridge. Full moons occurred on 14 April and 13 May.

I observed a gray-morph Eastern Screech-Owl on three consecutive nights starting 11 May 2006. The bird was walking slowly along the edge of the slough, at times wading into the water up to 30 cm from the shore, to the depth of ~3 cm. I observed it for 5 min on the first night starting at 0312 hrs EDT. It caught a fish ~3 cm long and immediately flew away. On another night I watched it for 12 min starting at 0405 hrs. It flushed after a 1.5-m long American alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*) approached it to within 1 m. On a third night I observed it for less than 1 min at 0304 hrs. It caught a fish ~5 cm

long, flew to a small branch ~60 cm above the water and, after perching there for <1 min with the fish in its talons, flew out of sight. Both fish were caught by a rapid movement of one foot. They could not be identified, but the shallow area where the owl waded was frequented by introduced sailfin mollies (*Poecilia latipinna*).

In April 2007, a Barred Owl (*Strix varia*) was repeatedly seen fishing in the same way at the same location.

DISCUSSION

Fishing has been reported for many large owls (Marks et al. 1999), but there seem to be few published observations of fishing behavior by small owls. The only other small owls known to fish are the closely related Western Screech-Owl (*M. kennicottii*), which has been observed catching crayfish and fish by flying from a perch (Cannings and Angell 2001), and the Vermiculated Screech-Owl (*M. guatemalae*), which had fish in stomach contents (Land 1970). This lack of data might reflect the uniqueness of these three species' fishing abilities among small owls or, more likely, poor knowledge of foraging behavior of many small owls. Eastern Screech-Owls use all fishing techniques known (Marks et al. 1999) for owls: wading (present study), flying from a perch (Prescott 1985), and hopping from shore (Gehlbach 1994).

The timing of the fishing activity seems unusual, as screech-owls are more active during the first half of the night (Johnsgard 1988). The slough at the time of observation had rapidly decreasing water levels and high fish density, and was attracting many other fish-eaters. Up to 15 Black-crowned Night-Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*), five Yellow-crowned Night-Herons (*Nyctanassa violacea*), 12 Great Blue Herons (*Ardea herodias*), 12 Great Egrets (*A. alba*), and 2–3 Wood Storks (*Mycteria americana*) were present there at night. Black-crowned Night-Herons were replaced at dawn by up to 30 White Ibises (*Eudocimus albus*), a number of smaller egrets and, on most days, by five resident North American otters (*Lontra canadensis*). Eight

¹University of Miami, 1301 Memorial Drive, Coral Gables, FL 33146, USA; e-mail: dinets@gmail.com

American alligators were also actively fishing and courting there from sunset until 1–2 hrs after midnight. Fishing activity by these species was not recorded in detail, but the owl apparently visited the slough when the number of individuals of other bird species was lowest, between a rush of activity by larger birds during the first half of the night and another peak in activity at dawn.

LITERATURE CITED

- CANNINGS, R. J. AND T. ANGELL. 2001. Western Screech-Owl (*Otus kennicottii*). The birds of North America. Number 597.
- GEHLBACH, F. R. 1994. The Eastern Screech-Owl: life history, ecology and behavior in suburbia and the countryside. Texas A&M University Press, College Station, USA.
- JOHNSGARD, P. A. 1988. North American owls: biology and natural history. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C., USA.
- LAND, H. C. 1970. Birds of Guatemala. Livingston Publishing Company, Wynnewood, Pennsylvania, USA.
- MARKS, J. S., R. J. CANNINGS, AND H. MIKKOLA. 1999. Family Strigidae (typical owls). Pages 76–151 in Handbook of the birds of the world. Volume 5. Barn-owls to hummingbirds (J. del Hoyo, A. Elliott, and J. Sargatal, Editors). Lynx Edicions, Barcelona, Spain.
- PRESCOTT, K. W. 1985. Eastern Screech-Owl captures goldfish in patio pond. Wilson Bulletin 97:572–573.