

CHRISTMAS COUNT OWLING

by Brian Cassie

Back in 1974, before I had ever heard an Eastern Screech-Owl, I was on the Greater Boston Christmas Bird Count (CBC) with Mike Curtis, and we thought it would be worthwhile to try to find an owl. It was maybe 5:30 AM, and neither of us had the slightest idea of where to look and listen for owls. I remember opening up a Peterson guide and reading that screech-owls give a mournful whinny, so I tried whinnying in a mournful sort of way. Mike thought I was losing my mind, but somewhere out in the Lexington or Waltham woods an owl answered, eventually. It was the highlight of the day, at least for me.

Twenty-two years and many CBCs later, the whinnying of Eastern Screech-Owls and the hooting and tooting of other owl species are still always the most satisfying moments on a count. I have learned a few things about owl calling since that first CBC episode, and some of them, I think, may help you in your owling.

First, hope that the night is calm. Trying to hear owls is frustrating on a windy night, and, if truth be told, I spend as little time as possible owling on windy evenings, even on CBCs.

Second, try to find a low-density traffic area. Where I live, in Foxboro, we have the mixed blessing of being surrounded on all sides by highways. If I have to get anywhere, I can be on Route 95, 495, or 1 in a matter of minutes. On the other hand, if I want to listen for owls, I have to do it somewhere besides Foxboro. All night long, trucks are whistling, droning, and humming along these highways, and the sound is a real distraction when listening for owls. Most CBCs have lots of areas suitable for owling. Ask the compiler if there are areas where no one is going out to look for owls. Chances are very good there will be.

Next, if there is an opportunity, scout the territory beforehand. In a few hours, you can mark your map with many likely owl spots. What are you looking for during your scouting trip? Generally, woodlands, meadows, or some combination of the two with no houses in close proximity to the road. You are out there to call in owls, not to wake people or their dogs. This is important.

Different species of owls have different habitat preferences, of course, and you will want to try to find a variety of owls. Here are a few takes on the most common owls in eastern Massachusetts.

Eastern Screech-Owl. I am convinced that this owl is as common as all other southeastern Massachusetts birds-of-prey combined. Look for it especially in deciduous woodlands. The most productive woods are not too dense (easy to see through at night), with thirty-to fifty-foot trees. It is usually easy to find screech-owls if you have patience, not the patience of Job, just the patience to give the owl or owls the chance to appear at their own schedule. Screech-owls

almost always have to be called to. They very seldom are calling when you emerge from your vehicle. I highly recommend learning to imitate this owl's call. Tape recorders are a drag, especially fumbling with them in the cold and dark. I usually call for about twenty seconds or so, listen for thirty or forty seconds, and repeat this until an owl responds. Eastern Screech-Owls often fly in quite close to the owl caller without making a sound. Scores of times I have seen these birds land on a branch over my head or across the street, never having called once. For this reason, you should always look around all the time you are out owling. When an owl does respond to your calls, try to "talk" to it, using the same inflection and spacing it does while calling. This is fun, and I think it brings the owl into view more quickly. Before long, you will realize that screech-owls have a lot more than just two calls. Do not call too loudly, especially once the owl is responding to you. And please do not keep up the whistling for too long at one spot. Winter is a tough season for owls, and you do not want to keep them from their hunting duties.

Great Horned Owl. This is the second most common owl in my experience, at least in the eastern part of the state. Getting this owl on your CBC list is also easy. Great Horned Owls start hooting all by themselves a couple of hours before dawn and keep it up until first light. Familiarize yourself with their very deep hooting, and just listen every time you get out of the car. More often than not, two will be calling, male and female on different pitches. These birds are seldom calling close to a road and often from the depths of a distant stand of white pines. You do not have much chance of seeing Great Horned Owls during predawn hours. If you really want to see one, mark down the locations of calling birds on your map, and look over the trees during daylight hours.

Barred Owl. After the above two species, all other eastern Massachusetts owls are relatively hard to find. Big woods, deciduous or mixed, are the places to hoot for Barred Owls, which usually have to be hooted in, although they will occasionally start calling with no prompting in December. If you are in an area that traditionally has Barred Owls, be persistent. When they finally start calling, you can be in for some spectacular hooting. Very often more than one will call, so again listen carefully.

Saw-whet Owl. These owls are just as cute at night as during the day and finding one on a CBC is a thrill. Every Saw-whet Owl I have found at night in Massachusetts was calling without prompting. I have yet to get one going from a "cold start," but I keep trying. The call is easy to learn and imitate. Even if you cannot get one to answer your calls, you can always listen for one. Like screech-owls, they will often fly in for a close look without vocalizing, as I have experienced in other areas.

Long-eared Owl. These birds are well known for their vocal repertory, which is varied, to say the least. There are a lot of sounds out there at night: chirps, creaks, moans, howls, screeches, and one of them may be a Long-eared

Owl. It is best to study this species' taped calls in advance. If you think you hear one on your owl prow, try to hoot it in, perhaps using its distinctive, short "wooo" call. If you do not have any luck, come back during the day, and check the evergreens. Long-eared Owls can make themselves virtually invisible, even in large pines. Check close to the trunk, all the way up to the crown of the tree.

What sort of success rate can you expect? If the night is calm and you get into the field early, you should be able to find a goodly number of owls. I try for Eastern Screech-Owls at virtually every stop and occasionally whistle or hoot for the other owls, depending on the location and how cold my toes are growing. Over the last decade, I have found CBC owls at the rate of one for every eight minutes in the field, including driving time. On two CBCs in December 1995 our groups found thirty-one Eastern Screech-Owls, eighteen Great Horned Owls, two Barred Owls, and one Long-eared Owl in six hours and forty minutes of nocturnal "watching" (plus one Short-eared Owl being mobbed by crows in mid-morning). That is one owl every 7.7 minutes, about average.

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