

Two Eastern Screech-Owls

*T*wo eastern screech-owls were sleeping side by side, wings touching, on a frozen Valentine's Day morning. Their feathers were fluffed against the cold, their eyes closed, and their heads tilted down a bit as if resting their chins on their chests. It was bright and sunny outside, but inside the roost box it was peaceful and dark.

They were a well-matched duo. Like most eastern screech-owl pairs, they were the same age, both almost 4 years old. They



were skilled hunters that had spent so much time together that they knew exactly what the other one was up to even when they were hunting in different parts of the woods. Now, comfortably roosting together, their shared body heat made their winter roost box warm and cozy.

Suddenly they woke with a start as a loud, rhythmic hammering erupted. A downy woodpecker in the neighborhood had decided that this particular wood duck box produced the loudest sound anywhere on his territory. Several times a day, he would fly in and start pounding away. The female owl, the larger and more irritable of the two, climbed to the entrance hole and stuck her head out, startling the woodpecker in mid-drum. He flew off.

The sun was shining directly on the box now, warming the screech-owl's head feathers, so she stayed put, dozing a bit. Gradually her stomach started churning, and up came a pellet, which she spit out on the ground below. Most of her pellets contained the indigestible remains of just one or two mice, but last night was an exceptional hunting night, and so this was a big pellet—the leftover fur, bones, and teeth of three mice. She needed the calories after two bad nights. A huge blizzard had kept her and her mate in the box three nights ago. The following night was clear, but the winds were fierce, and

she wasn't hungry enough to face that. Her mate did go out for a little while and caught one plump mouse. He bit off the front third and swallowed it right where he killed it. Then, because the oncoming breeding season was affecting his hormone levels, he brought the rest to her. Had anyone examined the pellets they produced yesterday, they would have found half of a mouse's bones in each.

In winter, most of her pellets and those of her mate fell into their roost cavity. The bottom of this wood duck box was thick with them, cushioning and insulating the floor. She was much more careful not to spit pellets into her nesting cavity than into her winter roost.

She wasn't entirely satisfied with this roost. It was a wood duck box, rather large for their nesting requirements. Woodpecker holes and other natural cavities stay more humid and keep a more constant temperature than artificial nest boxes. Her mate kept a sharp lookout for undefended cavities on their territory, and most winters they alternated among three or even four for roosting. This year starlings had taken over the best ones.

A couple of weeks ago, her mate had dispatched a starling that had been roosting in a flicker hole. He had checked out the cavity and roosted in it twice since eating its former tenant. Several days ago he had even stored a couple of mice in it—a clear sign that he thought it might

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be a good choice for a nesting site this year. Her own rising hormone levels were making her restless. She would move into it in a few days, when they started courting in earnest. Hunkering down in a good nest cavity for a week or two seemed just the trigger she needed to start producing eggs.

She and her mate had settled in this city park when they first got together

almost three years before. That first year they tried to nest in a different flicker hole, but she got skittish when starlings kept trying to take over, and she finally gave up. The second year her mate found a pileated woodpecker hole that turned out to be ideal. They successfully raised all four chicks that year, and last year they raised five more healthy owlets in it. But a storm last fall

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knocked the tree down. Fortunately, this happened after the young had all fledged, and none of them happened to be roosting in it at the time.

For all its flaws, this box was in the perfect location for a winter roost, close to the city zoo, where mice could always be found raiding the zoo animals' food troughs. The first year, her mate had bruised his wing colliding with a bar on

the giraffe's cage and started avoiding the zoo, but after she figured out where to perch on the top of enclosures so she could drop down on mice safely, the zoo became her favorite hunting ground. In summer, the security lights drew in plenty of big moths too.

She was dozing again when her mate got restless and started jostling against her. She pulled in her head and retreated


to the floor while he took a turn with his head sticking out. Any passing birders would not have realized this was a different individual. Eastern screech-owls come in two colors, gray and red, which differ genetically in much the way people with blond or brown hair differ, but like the vast majority of screech-owls in Minnesota, these individuals were both gray. In screech-owls, gray feathers tend to be thicker and more durable than red ones and probably provide better insulation; those with gray plumage have much higher survival rates during cold weather.

No passing birders noticed the owls, but suddenly a blue jay did and started squawking. The owl pulled back into the box, sat beside his mate again, and started preening the feathers on her face. She moved her head toward him and closed her eyes as he drew the feathers through his beak, and after a minute or two, she took a turn preening him. Preening one another's facial feathers helps cement the bond between owls. Young screech-owls remain in the nest for a full month after hatching, and after they fledge, the family stays close together for at least two months longer. This mutual preening among family members strengthens their bonds, keeping the young with their parents and promoting their survival until they have all the skills necessary to survive independently.

When parents can't find enough

food for their nestlings, the smallest may die. But in 75 percent of nests unmolested by predators, all the young survive to fledge. Nests in urban areas are far less likely to suffer predation than those in wilder areas.

In late afternoon, the female climbed up to the entrance hole again and looked out for twenty minutes or so before her mate got restless. She stepped back, letting him take over the entrance. He studied everything going on around him as the sun slowly sank. Crows were flying overhead, all headed southeast toward their roost. One by one, chickadees were disappearing into their cavities, and squirrels into their leafy shelters. One squirrel kicked off a twig as he jumped from branch to branch in a maple tree. The twig dropped into a little puddle of snowmelt with a welcome plop. The temperature was falling, but winter really was losing its sting.

Fifteen minutes after sunset, the male pulled out of the cavity to start his busy night. His mate soon followed. Wild eastern screech-owls have survived 14 years or more. Chances were excellent that this pair would be found together in these lovely woods for years to come. 

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