

Friends of Cortes Island

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 seen 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 what is happening to this little owl and what we can do to help.



Screech Owls on Cortes We know Screech owls have occurred on Cortes, but their numbers have dwindled. There are historic records from the Gorge Harbour Area, and the picture below 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 Cortes.



Photo courtesy of Cortes Island Museum and Archives Society

FOCI, Screech Owls and the Discovery Islands

In 2021, FOCI was successful in obtaining government Habitat Stewardship Program funding to undertake Screech Owl research on Cortes, and support further research on Read, Maurelle and Sonora Islands.

The research is being guided by the Pacific Megascops (Screech Owl) Research Alliance and Ministry biologists, who are excited to support this work in the Discovery Islands, as it will fill a large gap in their understanding of Western Screech Owl distribution.

The islands are considered to represent a unique set of ecosystems, sitting as they do at the juncture between the Sunshine Coast and Vancouver Island, and it is hoped that findings will help inform an understanding of habitat preferences for screech owls in the rest of coastal BC.

Searching for owls – ARUs and CPBs! Working with researchers we have identified areas that are thought to have most potential for these owls on Cortes. They are largely in the north of the island, and include Carrington Regional Park and Háthayim (Von Donop) Marine Provincial Park.

During February and March 2022, FOCI biologists will be surveying for Screech Owls in these areas. We will be undertaking two kinds of surveys. Firstly, we will be doing call-play-back (**CPB**) surveys at night; playing screech owl calls at set intervals on predetermined routes, and 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 see what they find and compare notes.



On Cortes we will also be putting up Autonomous Recording Units (**ARUs**) at a number of carefully selected locations. These units will record all sounds over a period of two weeks. The data we collect will be analyzed by Ministry biologists to identify screech owl calls and other species that may be present.

A world of sound The bonus of doing this work is that we get a 'soundscape' of the local area. If we are lucky enough to find Screech Owls, we will also get an important picture of other species they occur with, including prey species, such as the Pacific chorus frog.

At the same time it gives us an opportunity to learn about other species that might be present in more remote parts of the island including wolves, and species at risk such as the Northern Goshawk, enabling us to find out more about important wildlife on Cortes.

The Bigger Picture

The Pacific Megascops Research Alliance (PMRA) is working to further our understanding of Western Screech-Owls, with the goals of identifying critical habitat and understanding causes of widespread declines. To do so they are collaborating with provincial and federal government biologists and a number of NGOs including Birds Canada, WildResearch and FOCI to complete surveys across coastal BC.

'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

The Province of BC is also currently supporting research to determine how Western Screech Owl populations have responded to habitat loss and Barred Owl invasions across their range.

What next? We have applied for further funding from the Habitat Stewardship Program for 2022-24. This will allow us to carry out follow up surveys on any Screech Owl findings from this year; work with landowners to protect suitable habitat and install nest boxes; and carry out community engagement through workshops and talks, so everyone has the chance to get involved.

You can help! We would love to hear from you if you have any memories of Screech owls on Cortes, or even better if you think you may have seen or heard one. You can find out more about this little owl on our website at www.friendsofcortes.org friendsofcortes@gmail.com

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Environment and
Climate Change Canada

Environnement et
Changement climatique Canada

The BC Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development



Volunteers from Reed, Sonora and Maurelle islands.

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

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.
