

NOCTURNAL neighbors

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Section



Mark Matson FOR AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Austin is the 'mother lode' for screech owls, says ornithologist Cliff Shackelford, who builds 'Owl Shacks,'

like this one in a West Austin yard. The owls take up residence in the boxes in cooler-weather months.

Backyard birders get hooked on owls with 'shacks' made in Austin



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Cliff Shackelford started building the shacks, made from recycled fence lumber, for friends and family and began selling them as demand grew. They cost \$35.

By Julie Bonnin

SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN-STATESMAN

They are out there, always, but we seldom notice them when we're shut in our houses for much of the year in air-conditioned isolation.

Then the weather changes, windows open, and the distinctive trill of the Eastern screech owl can be heard again in the early morning or evening hours. Their mating call comes from deep within the tree canopy and sounds enough like a horse's whinny that you stop what you're doing and listen.

Eastern screech owls don't need anything from us, really. The nocturnal birds of prey are here year-round, expertly hunting mice and other rodents, wood roaches and grasshoppers. They don't build nests, but will roost in rock wall niches, tree hollows or old stick nests that other birds have vacated.

So a popular Austin innovation called the Owl Shack is really for the benefit of their human admirers, a way to entice and corral owls close enough that we can observe these fascinating creatures to our hearts' content.

Consider the fanciful names given the tenants of Owl Shacks in Austin backyards. Former "Austin City Limits" producer Bill Arhos has welcomed Owlvin, Owlfonso and Ron Owlivera. A master naturalist recently put dibs on the name Whodini.

But on this night we are in Jim Stone's yard

'ACL' founder
tunes into his
owl house.

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HOUSES: Neighbors flock to watch baby screech owls

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waiting for an owl simply called "Screech." With us is Cliff Shackelford, an ornithologist. He and his wife, Julie, a professional biologist, make and sell Owl Shacks, including the one Stone put up in his Shady Hollow backyard last year. Because the black wooden boxes can get too hot during spring and summer, owls typically vacate their homes then and return with fall's cooler weather.

"They usually arrive after the first few cold fronts, in October or November, about the time you bring out the down comforter," Cliff Shackelford says.

Stone, advertising director for Texas Parks & Wildlife magazine, nailed his shack to a live oak last year. This year, he spotted Screech in September — "almost exactly a year to the day" from when the owl set up housekeeping in 2005, Stone says.

But on this evening, Screech is nowhere to be seen, and Stone and Shackelford wonder whether they've scared him away. Many owls are surprisingly



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When Cliff and Julie Shackelford found owlets had been born in their owl house, they had so many visitors they had to set up viewing hours.

tolerant of backyard activity, though viewing them is often easier with a telescopic lens or from an upstairs window.

Shackelford has his own neighborhood owl, of course. Owls like to nest in trees with plenty of flyway, so the Shackelford family "shares" an owl with next-door neighbors who own a perfectly situated tree for an owl

box. Last year, a clutch of babies was born in the box, and the Shackelfords were so overrun with visitors clamoring to see the owlets and their parents that they had to assign viewing hours.

Suddenly, there is movement in Stone's box, and Screech, a stocky bird with mottled gray and brown feather⁹, peers

sleepily at us through slit eyes. "It's the equivalent of pre-coffee in the morning," Shackelford says.

He or she is a gray screech owl — one of 17 owl species common in Texas. "Austin is the mother lode as far as screech owl country," Shackelford says, adding that screech owls with more reddish coloring tend to live further southeast of here. Great horned owls and barred owls are also common in Central Texas.

Shackelford has been making owl shacks from recycled fence lumber for several years. At first he gave them to family and friends, but eventually began selling them (\$35 each) as demand grew. Now the Web site for his business, www.owlshack.com, offers testimonials from more than a dozen happy customers. A sampling:

"Everyone on the street from age 6 to age 78 is delighted! We've all been out watching this fabulous creature all day."

"Looking out of my son's bedroom window and seeing the little owl perched snoozing in the box for the first time, the children and I drew in our breaths

and silently watched him for quite a while. . . . Many evenings this winter we sat together by the window in the darkening room quietly watching the owl take its swooping glide out of the box to begin the night's hunt."

"We love birds and enjoy watching them . . . but nothing has given us more enjoyment than our owl box. Every winter since we put it up three years ago we've had resident screech owls and every spring we've watched owlets fledge. We go to sleep at night listening to their lovely calls."

We're still under Screech's spell, mesmerized by his every movement, when Shackelford's cell phone rings.

After a brief conversation with his wife, he clicks off the phone. "Blinky's in there; Blinky's back," he announces.

To the relief and delight of all, Blinky, the owl adopted by the Shackelfords and their neighbors, is home again.

ON THE WEB: Haven't heard the Eastern screech owl call? Choose the "B song" on this Web site: <http://www.owlpages.com/owls.php?genus=Megascops&species=asio>

Owls' calls are music to 'Austin City Limits' founder

What is it about Austin that makes us embrace critters that people in other cities turn away from?

We've got a tourist destination centered on our downtown bats, even as other locales scheme to drive them out. Our pushy, noisy grackles are showing up on T-shirts (see www.grackle.net).

Maybe the owls, longtime residents of Central Texas, are next. With fans like Bill Arhos, former president and general manager of KLRU-TV, it's no wonder.

Ever since the "Austin City Limits" founder retired nine years ago, Arhos has become increasingly enamored of bird-watching. And owls have always held a special place in his heart. Walking the four miles to work at the University of Texas in the early morning hours, he says, he used to hear the calls of dozens of Eastern screech owls.

In the first few months after he erected an owl shack about 15 feet up the south side of a large pecan tree several years ago, he noticed other creatures inhabiting the box. Then, one very cold day, a man who came to install a new furnace asked whether an owl was living in the box on the tree.

"No, I've had nothing but squirrels in

there," Arhos told him.

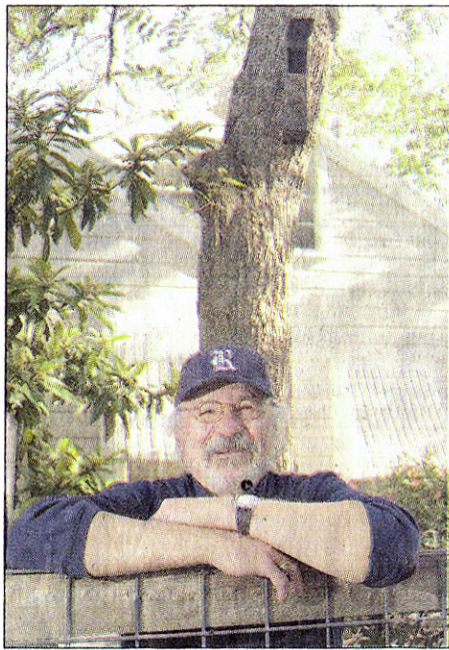
"That squirrel has feathers," the young man said.

Sure enough, Arhos' first owl tenant had moved in, feathers puffed up against the winter chill. This year's occupant, inexplicably, arrived during the dog days of August. Arhos has introduced nearly a dozen friends to owl-watching, and he has been known to point out snoozing birds to people jogging by in his Tarrytown neighborhood.

"I gave one (an owl house) to a friend of mine, he played basketball at Rice. His owl had babies and he went berserk," Arhos chuckles. (Arhos is also an alumnus of Rice, whose mascot is an owl.)

Why are owls so good at capturing our imagination? Arhos isn't sure, but he's learned a lot from watching them — how the females inspect the roost before settling in to have babies, how a clutch can include both gray and red or brown morph owlets, due to cross-breeding between different types of owls, and the presence of a recessive gene.

An outdoorsman and avid birder, Arhos says he wishes he'd begun hunting with a camera instead of a gun years ago. "I've really grown to love these little guys."



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Former KLRU-TV executive Bill Arhos learns from watching the habits of owls, and he's introduced a dozen friends to the hobby.