

The Daily Sentinel

Sunday, November 9, 2008 •

Serving Nacogdoches, the Oldest Town in Texas, since 1899

'They're not chateaus. They're shacks' The Hiltons of the owl kingdom built right here

Owl Shacks are
shipped across
the country

By **ANDREW GOODRIDGE**
Sentinel Staff

It's November. Do you know where your owls are?

As the cool weather falls on East Texas, more people will be wearing sweaters, drinking coffee and sitting by the fire. But how does an owl come in from the cold?

The Eastern Screech Owl, the pint-sized owl in Nacogdoches backyards that eats bugs, roosts in trees, and squints at you like it knows something you don't, isn't planning to fly north for

the holidays and will soon be seeking warmer habitats.

Haven't seen an owl in your backyard recently? Look closer.

"Screech owls are resident birds. They're already here; you just don't know where to find them," said Cliff Shackelford, a Nacogdoches ornithologist (bird genius), whose invention, the Owl Shack, might help people spot those elusive owls.

Shackelford has been making his own backyard owl houses since the early 1990s. What started as a hobby during graduate school has taken flight, and there are now Owl Shacks in 28 states.

An Owl Shack is a rectangular cedar box, not quite 3 feet tall and not quite a foot across, built

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Contributed photo by Eric Hull

One of Cliff Shackelford's Owl Shacks has an Eastern Screech Owl tenant. Shackelford's owl houses are specially designed to keep the birds warm and safe from predators.



Staff photo by Andrew Goodridge

Local ornithologist Cliff Shackelford builds owl houses suitable for the Eastern Screech Owl, which can be found in many Nacogdoches trees and backyards.

Shacks

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specifically to hang from trees to give the screech owl a makeshift home. Rough, rustic and simple, the Owl Shack is a wooden box of much more elegance than Shackelford gives himself credit for.

"They're not chateaus. They're shacks," he said.

But the design, which Shackelford created, is a bit more precise and evolved than it might seem at first glance. The box has a wide-mouth opening for the owls to sit and roost, a deep cavity for the birds to build a nursery for their young, and it's long enough to keep owls out of reach from predators like cats and raccoons. And the seven pieces of stapled-together wood come together to form something as good as, if not better than, an abandoned woodpecker cavity, which is the screech owl's preferred digs. It's the owl house for owl-house-essentialists.

But compared to a typical rotted, crumbly tree hole, Owl Shacks are the Hiltons of the bird kingdom. The shacks have taken years of development and couldn't have been made by your run-of-the-mill owl novice. Shackelford has had a lifelong interest in birds, which he has taken into his professional career.

"I've been into birds since I was a kid — since I was about 9," he said.

Shackelford's youth was spent right here in Texas. He's a fifth-generation Texan, to be exact, and he's built his shacks and his business in the area.

"Owl Shacks were born right here in Nacogdoches," he said. "And I think that's important."

Owl Shacks may not put Nacogdoches on the map, but they may inspire a few people to look it up.

"People are curious where they're sending their money. They look at the Web site and they're like, 'Nac-Og-Do-Ches'? It's neat," he said.

Given the product, it's not surprising that Owl Shacks are built to be environmentally friendly. When possible, the shacks are built from recycled picket fence wood, and when he used to live

in Austin, Shackelford worked with local fencing companies to repurpose discarded fences into owl houses.

The Owl Shacks give a stable home to the screech owls, which extends their benefit to the environment in other ways, too.

"(Owls) eat mice and roaches. That's a lot better than putting out pesticides," he said.

Shackelford's business has gained quite a cult-following from past customers, and his Web site, www.OwlShack.com, encourages shack owners to share their owl successes.

"We have a lot of people who name their owls. People get so into it!" he said.

Owl landlords have christened their tenants with names like Owl Capone, Whodini, Winston Churchowl, and TonieSoprano, which is apparently an obscure owl-themed play on words.

Building little Powla Abdul and Simon Cowl custom home is a time-consuming task. Each shack takes about an hour to build, and Shackelford does all the work himself.

"Everybody thinks I should get some cheap labor to do them, but that's not the point. I like doing it. It keeps me away from the TV and off the computer and keeps me working with my hands," he said.

Shackelford earned his master's degree from SFA and wrote his thesis on woodpeckers. He has published a book, "Hummingbirds of Texas," and his publisher asked him to write books on owls and woodpeckers of Texas. Given his knowledge of native birds, it's no surprise that his invention caters to the screech owl, which is commonly found throughout many regions of the state.

The Eastern Screech Owl can be found in most of the United States, from Texas and Oklahoma and Nebraska on north to Canada and east to the Atlantic. The Western Screech Owl picks up where the Eastern leaves off, populating the Southwest to the Pacific Northwest. Screech owls are found all across the country, and not just in the woods.

"Screech owls are familiar be-

cause they are quite tolerant of human activity and nest in several kinds of artificial cavities," writes Frederick Gehlbach in his book, "The Eastern Screech Owl: Life History, Ecology, and Behavior in the Suburbs and Countryside."

It isn't much of a stretch for owls to make a home out of Shackelford's shacks. Gehlbach found that screech owls are just as likely to nest in an artificial cave as they are to make a home in a natural cavity, such as a hollow tree or abandoned woodpecker cave, and the productivity of eggs and fledglings between natural and artificial homes are about the same. Not only do the owls take to artificial nests, but Gehlbach found that the species is migrating inward to the cities, near people, homes and backyard owl houses.

"The thing about cities is that we cut down dead trees or dead limbs and that's usually where the cavities are that the owls are looking for," Shackelford said. "Urban areas work well for the screech owl."

Though the screech owl trend toward the cities is a widespread occurrence according to Gehlbach, Shackelford said it's impossible to guarantee that every shack will eventually be home to an owl.

"There's no guarantee with wildlife. Wildlife makes their own decisions," he said.

And in this case, wildlife has made its decision, giving a certified thumbs-up to the Owl Shack. And Shackelford is happy to be a part of nature, in whatever way possible.

"It's neat to give the owls a home, but I also want to get people interested in nature. And you can get interested in nature even if you're living in a city," he said. "A lot of people don't realize owls live in cities, so to them it's a big eye-opener. All of a sudden, their world is changed."

For Shackelford, that's the best part.

"To me, that's what I'm most interested in. Getting people to see what I see: the beauty of nature," he said.

"And how cool birds are."

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