

FEBRUARY 15 – 28, 2019 NATURAL HISTORY NOTES

By Dick Harlow

WHITE-TAILED DEER – WINTER



White-tailed Deer, *Odocoileus virginianus*

© National Park Service Notice the thicker gray winter coat

Winter snow is a mixed blessing for White-tailed Deer. If the snow is light, they can move about quite easily. On the other hand, if it is deep, they have to yard-up (come together in a group) and tramp down the snow so that it doesn't hamper their movements. However, it does hamper their ability to move about to find food.



White-tailed Deer, yarding during the winter.

© (Denver Bryan/Images on the Wildside)

Mild winters and light snow provide the best conditions for deer to survive the winter. Heavy, deep snow or ice causes the worst times for the survival of the older, weaker and young of the herd. This time of year, winter, produces the conditions for the saying – "survival of the fittest."

However, as our planet warms over time, deer herds will increase as there will be less snow and more food available. Disease and deer overeating their habitat creates problems. These problems don't produce a healthy herd. Other than man, past predators of deer herds like wolf and puma, traditionally took the weak and injured. In that way a herd was kept healthy.

Keep in mind one salient truth: Deer need predators to keep herds and also the forest they live in healthy. Man is presently the only predator in the Northeast and only during very specific times of year. Deer herds are not kept healthy by preventing other predators from hunting them. Plus, Vermont, for example, had fewer hunters in 2017, during deer season than in the past. Therefore, in specific areas of Vermont, deer are causing significant destruction to the habitat by over browsing young tree growth. This creates

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ample opportunity for alien plants like buckthorn and honeysuckle to outcompete tree seedlings. Deer will not necessarily feed on alien plants except as a last resort.

This problem needs to be mitigated if we are going to have both a healthy deer herd and a healthy forest.

SCREECH-OWL



(1) Red/Rufous phase Screech-Owl, *Megascops asio*, © Greg Hume



(2) Gray phase Screech-Owl, *Megascops asio*, © David Wade

Screech-Owls have two color phases, photos (1) and (2) are pictures showing each phase.

The scientific name for the Eastern Screech-Owl, *Megascops asio* should not be confused with the Western Screech-Owl, *Megascops kennicottii*. Even with the same Genus name, but different species name, pictures in field guides may look similar to the Eastern gray phase Screech-owl.

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The Eastern Screech Owl is quite common in a variety of habitats as long as these habitats have trees. Trees may be spaced apart; but for this species to be sighted there must be groups of trees in the area. Therefore, the species can be found in a farmer's woodlot, in a forest, wooded swamps, or wooded backyards. However, what is interesting is that some field guides say that this species is not found in eastern VT, northern NH or the state of ME. Other than the above, this species is found as far west as eastern Montana, southwest Texas and the Mexican border and east to Florida. On the other side of the Rocky Mountains, including south to Mexico, and north along the coast to Alaska is the territory of the Western Screech-Owl.

I have to admit I have not heard, nor have I seen a Screech-owl in VT. But I enjoyed many encounters with this species south of VT in MA. Its call is quite specific to this species and definitely can't be confused with either the Saw-wet, Barred or Great Horned Owls that we hear and see in VT. If you Google Eastern Screech-owl there will be various sound alternatives you can click onto.

The Eastern Screech-owl feeds on a variety of prey. Even though it is not the smallest owl, (it certainly is small by comparison to the Barred Owl) which limits its choice of prey. However, don't underestimate this species. It feeds on rodents, such as voles and mice, but will also attack frogs, beetles, snakes and birds. Birds at feeders or as large as Ruffed Grouse can be on its menu.

Screech-owls nest in old woodpecker holes or hollowed out areas of trees. This means that they can also nest in wooden boxes that have a hole that is at least 3" in diameter. As much as I would love to put up a nesting box, the fact that they are not found here and that our grounds do not fit the habitat, I will have to wait until they extend their range to the northern tier of the East!

OBSERVATIONS

MAMMALS

Gray Squirrel – checking feeders

Eastern Cottontail – tracks and scat

Weasel – scat still present

Red Fox – Buzz Brumbaugh on Deer Meadow watched a Red Fox hunt traditionally, as shown either on TV or photos, by jumping into the air, coming down head first in the snow and retrieving a vole.

Meadow Vole – caught by fox

Weather Tidbits

Month of FEBRUARY 1-31, 2019

[All Measurements taken at solar noon \(1230 EST\).](#)

PRECIPITATION

Total Precipitation: 32.0 mm or 1.6 inches. Significant low precipitation.

Overcast Days: 12