

BC's Coast Region: Species & Ecosystems of Conservation Concern

Western Screech Owl *kennicottii* subspecies (*Megascops kennicottii kennicottii*)

Global: G5T4 Provincial: S3 COSEWIC: SC BC List: Blue



Adult



Juvenile

Notes on *Megascops kennicottii kennicottii*: A member of the family Strigidae (“typical owls”), western forms were long thought to be one in the same species (conspecific) as Eastern Screech Owl (*O. asio*). It was not until the late 1960’s that Western Screech Owl was designated as a separate species. Eight subspecies are recognized of which two, *O. k. kennicottii* (coastal) and *O. k. macfarlanei* (interior) are found in BC.

Description

Length 19-25.5 cm, Weight 120-305 g. A small owl with yellow eyes, a small beak and black eyebrow ridges that lead up in a “Y” configuration to short ear tufts on the corners of the head. The head is crowned with a triangular russet and black cap that follows the eyebrow ridge to the ear tufts. A master of arboreal camouflage, the white to pale-grey plumage is streaked with black and brown making it difficult to see against tree trunks or cavities where it generally roosts and nests. The coastal subspecies tends to have greater brown colouration while the interior subspecies is greyer. As with most raptors, females are generally larger and heavier than males. Northern subspecies are often larger and heavier than the southern subspecies.

Diet

A non-specific predator, this subspecies preys on small animals, including mice, shrews, birds, insects, frogs, salamanders, crayfish, fish, and a range of insects and even worms.

Look's Like?

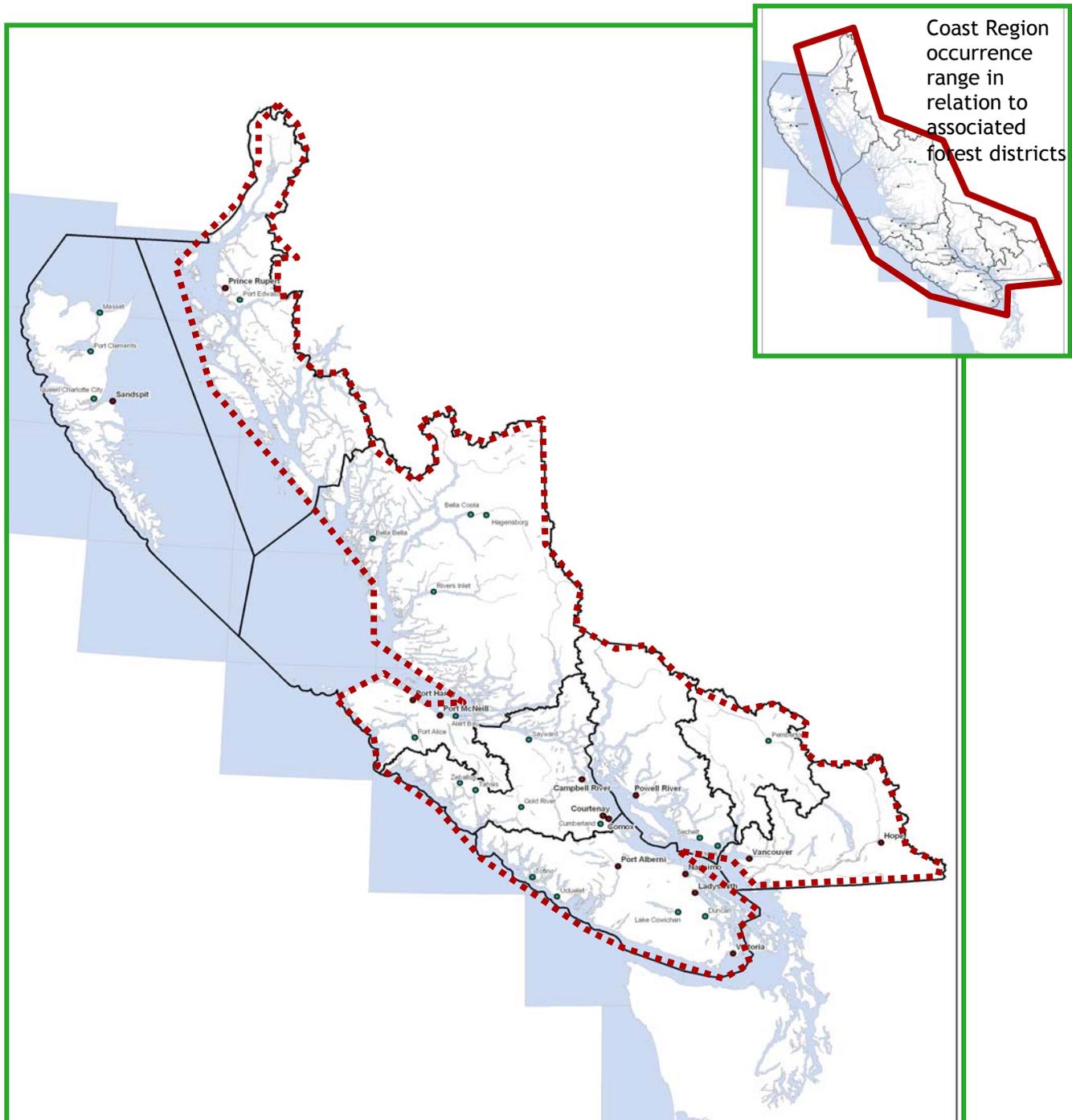
There are a number of arboreal owl species, some with ear tufts and similar camouflage patterning (e.g. Long-eared and Great-horned Owl) but all are significantly larger than Western Screech Owl.



Great-horned Owl

Distribution

Elevation 0-600 m. The coastal subspecies is distributed throughout the Coast Region including Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands (absent from Haida Gwaii). This subspecies was once considered to be one of the most common small owls in southwest BC but has shown a strong decline since the 1990's, especially near settlement areas in the Fraser Lowlands and southern Vancouver Island.



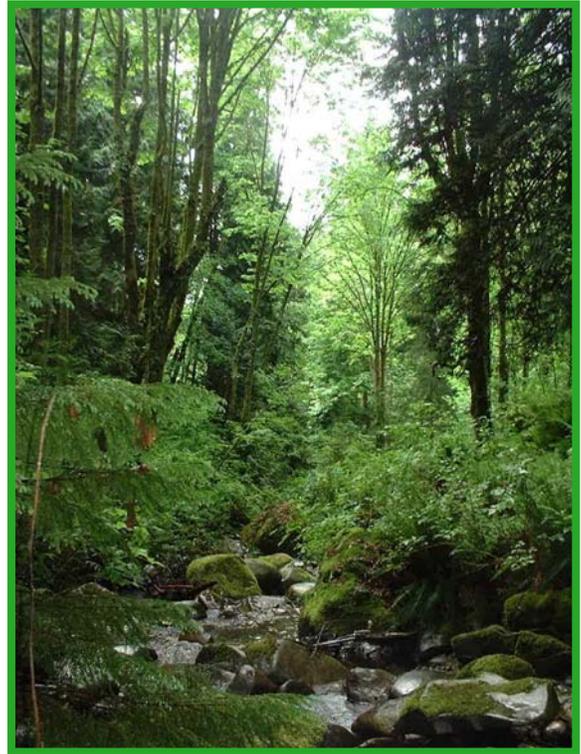
Western Screech Owl *kennicottii* subspecies (*Megascops kennicottii kennicottii*), potential occurrence range for the Coast Region

Habitat Preferences

While this subspecies is primarily associated with riparian or low elevation forests, it can also be found in treed urban and suburban environments, and at the edge of forested habitats close to wetlands or fields.

Critical Features

Western Screech Owl is a secondary cavity nester, dependent on other species such as Pileated Woodpecker and Northern Flicker to excavate nesting cavities. This owl will also readily use nest boxes. Breeding territories are closely associated with riparian or low-mid elevation forest habitats and must contain at least two suitable cavities which are used for both nesting and roosting. Where optimal habitat occurs, home range sizes can be very small, and are generally assessed at 2.5-10 ha. Young of the year disperse from the natal area, with females travelling about three times as far as males (about 15 km vs. 5 km) in the first 3 months of dispersal. In British Columbia, nests ranged from 1.2 to 12.2 m above ground; all nests reported were in trees >25 cm dbh. Day roosts are usually in deciduous trees with a mean height of 21.2 m, at an average of 4.6 m high. The tree density around roosts tends to be greater than in the surrounding forest.



This species is generally found at lower elevations, in forested habitats often near water (i.e. riparian communities). Along the coast it seems to be associated with either coniferous or mixed (deciduous or coniferous) forests

Seasonal Life Cycle

| Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec |
|--|-----|--|-----|-----|-----------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| | | Breeding / Nesting. Clutch size 3-5 eggs | | | Chick's in nest | | | | | | |
| Young of the year, juveniles & adults active all year. | | | | | | | | | | | |

Breeding begins at one year, birds are monogamous and breed every year.

Threats

- ◆ Direct predation by larger owls (i.e. Barred and Great-horned Owl) and competition for prey resources is considered to be the single greatest factor contributing to this subspecies decline on the Coast Region.
- ◆ Secondary factors which may exacerbate impacts from Barred Owl competition include loss of preferred nesting features and prey availability (tied to forest structure), disturbance from urban and rural development and logging and competition for nesting cavities with other introduced species such as Eastern Grey Squirrel and European Starling.

Conservation & Management Objectives

- ◆ The COSEWIC recovery strategy developed for the *macfarlanei* subspecies should be investigated for transferable conservation and management objectives that can be applied to the coastal form. Integrate complimentary measures found in the “COSEWIC assessment and update status report on the Western Screech-owl *Otus kennicottii* in Canada, Best Management Practices for Raptor Conservation during Urban and Rural Land Development in British Columbia and the Accounts and Measures for Managing Identified Wildlife Western Screech Owl *Otus kennicottii macfarlanei* Accounts V. 2004.
- ◆ Assess, inventory and monitor using methodology setout in the RISC standards # 11 Inventory Methods for Raptors (Version 2.0).

Specific activities should include:

- ◆ Undertake control measures to reduce inter-species competition and predation (e.g. Barred and possibly Great-horned Owl).
- ◆ Consider utilizing this subspecies as an indicator for healthy riparian ecosystems and use in multispecies conservation plans.
- ◆ Buffers similar to those proposed for Pacific Water Shrew (100 meters from top of bank on each side of a watercourse) should be considered as part of protecting the broadest range of habitat features and functions. Riparian buffers imposed to protect fish habitat are insufficient for protecting the complete range of foraging and refugia requirements of this subspecies.
- ◆ Habitat conservation may be partially addressed by retaining well-connected urban and rural forest patches, riparian reserves and wildlife tree retention.
- ◆ Enhance cavity nesting opportunities through nest box programs which include exclusion maintenance for introduced species.

This subspecies is listed under the Federal Species at Risk Act (SARA) and is subject to protections and prohibitions under the BC Wildlife Act. Habitat for this species may also be governed under provincial and federal regulations including the Fish Protection Act and Federal Fisheries Act as well as Regional and local municipal bylaws.

Content for this Factsheet has been derived from the following sources

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Every effort has been made to ensure content accuracy. Comments or corrections should be directed to the South Coast Conservation Program: info@sccp.ca. Content updated August 2010.

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