

## Mystery bird lands in Tallahassee

From Florida to New York, a tiny owl causes a stir among birders and scientists.

by Sandy Beck

Recently, Dorothy Kaufmann, director of the Wildlife Sanctuary of Northwest Florida in Pensacola, stopped by for a visit. We had just transferred a permanently disabled Mississippi kite to the Pensacola sanctuary, and now they had a permanently disabled screech owl that needed a good home. The screech owl had been hit by a car in Gulf Shores, Alabama. We'd been thinking about acquiring another screech owl for our Wild Classroom education programs. So, after the required paperwork had been sent to U.S. Fish & Wildlife, Dorothy brought us the little owl.

We gently carried "Maya," named by education volunteer Barbara Sullivan, to the screech owl/kestrel enclosure to meet her new friends; however, when we removed her from the travel cage, and I looked into her dark brown eyes for the first time, my mouth dropped. "This a flammulated owl!"

### The eyes have it

The flammulated owl looks very similar to the eastern screech owl, but is a distinctly different species. At 60 grams, the grayish flammulated owl is about half the weight of an eastern screech owl and has shorter ear tufts and dark brown eyes. In fact, the flammulated owl is the only little owl in North America with dark brown eyes. Its coloration is also a little different. For one thing, this species has some reddish facial and body feathers . . . hence, "flammulated," meaning "flames."

Flammulated owls live west of the



These eastern screech owls are all members of our Wild Classroom. Both the red phase owl in the middle ("Red") and the brown phase owl on the right ("Otus") have yellow eyes. The gray phase owl on the left ("Maya") has dark brown eyes.

PHOTO BY DEAN JUE

Rocky Mountains and are not native to Florida or our neighboring states. They eat insects and migrate south in the winter to follow their food supply.

The eastern screech owl, Florida's smallest owl, is found in three colors – red, gray and brown, but its eyes are always yellow or yellowish-green.

Look carefully at the photo above, and you'll notice that the two yellow-eyed owls on the right also have longer ear tufts or feathered "horns."

### The plot thickens

Maya's brood patch (an area of skin on the female's belly that loses feathers during incubation) indicated that she was a female.

Female owls are larger than males of the same species; however, Maya was not only considerably smaller than Red, our female screech owl, but also smaller than Otus, our male screech owl.

But after weighing Maya (at 130 grams, twice as heavy as the typical flammulated owl), we were no longer positive that she was a flammulated owl.

### Scientifically noteworthy

We e-mailed local ornithologists, a few of whom flew over to see this "screechulated owl," (my humor) for themselves. A couple immediately proclaimed her a flammulated owl. Others, like Sally and Dean Jue, with the Florida Ornithological Society, took many pho-

tographs but reserved judgment. We also invited our friend, New York's renowned wildlife photographer, Lincoln Karim (palemale.com) to photograph Maya.

After looking at photos and listening to her (screech owl) call that Barbara Sullivan recorded, Dr. Gary Graves, Research Scientist and Curator, Department of Vertebrate Zoology at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, wrote in an e-mail, "This is definitely a strange bird. Based on the photographs you sent, if it weren't for the unusually large body mass, I would have no problem considering it to be a flammulated owl.

"There are several possible solutions to this mystery. This strange little owl could represent (1) an unusually fat and robust flammulated owl [Upon examination, she is not overweight.]; (2) some exotic species of Scops owl that doesn't normally occur in North America; (3) a bizarre screech owl with brown eyes [There has never been a brown-eyed screech owl on record]; or (4) a hybrid between the western screech owl [which lives west of the Rockies] and the flammulated owl. Any one of these possibilities is scientifically noteworthy.

"I have studied these sorts of phenomena for 30 years. This is indeed an interesting case!"

Dr. Graves went on to explain what

photos and sound files are still needed and how to keep detailed records.

### A wild fling

My personal (and as yet unsubstantiated) hunch is that Maya is the result of a wild fling between a flammulated owl and screech owl, a hybrid. She has the weight and call of a screech owl but the brown eyes and smaller stature and ear tufts of a flammulated owl.

Screech and flammulated owls used to share the same genus, "Otus." Just a few years ago, taxonomists (scientists who classify living things) decided to reclassify them into two different genera. So now the screech owl is *Megascops asio* and the flammulated owl is (still) *Otus flammeolus*.

According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's *Birds of North America Online*, two reasons for this change are their very different calls and mitochondrial DNA.

Only animals that share the same genus can interbreed, like wolves and domestic dogs or barred owls and spotted owls. While these the screech and flammulated owls do not currently share the same genus, they did up until just a few years ago.

### See for yourself

So, while this mystery continues to unravel, if you would like to see our beautiful little anomaly for yourself, you are invited to St. Francis Wildlife's 3rd Annual Wildlife Baby Shower at the Downtown Marketplace, Saturday, March 11. Maya will be joined by one of her yellow-eyed buddies. Also greeting admirers will be the other three owls native to North Florida – a great horned owl, barred and barn owl, as well as a beautiful red-tailed hawk and some lovely reptiles. Please see Page 3 for details.

If you miss the Wildlife Baby Shower, please see our calendar on Page 4 for more wildlife encounter opportunities.

For photos of Maya, log on to our web site, [www.stfranciswildlife.org](http://www.stfranciswildlife.org), select "Photos" and scroll down.

Two outstanding resources for more information on owls are: *The Owl Pages*, [www.owlpages.com](http://www.owlpages.com) and *Birds of North America Online*, <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu>.



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**Wildlife Wish List**

- Gift certificate to Panhandle Pet Supply Please see "Baby Shower," Page 3.
- Heating pads
- Plastic dog carriers
- Large parrot cages
- Humane, live traps
- Paper towels
- Unsalted peanuts in the shell
- Sunflower seed
- Wild bird seed
- Cracked corn
- Laundry detergent
- Bleach, unscented
- Liquid anti-bacterial hand soap
- Carpenters to make repairs
- Checks and cash

**Big Items**

- Vinyl Floor Covering for Hospital
- Air Compressor
- Incubator
- Brooder
- Golf Cart

**Cars for Critters**

Please consider making a tax-deductible donation of your used car, truck or boat. St. Francis will turn it into cash for critters!

**Special thanks to**

**Veterinary Hospitals**

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  - Quincy Animal Hospital
  - Seminole Animal Health Clinic
  - Shannon Lakes Paws & Claws
- **Kathy Archibald and The Archibald Foundation, Inc.** for a very generous grant for our general operating funds.

- **Rick Clevenger,** Clevenger Woodworks and **Tim O'Brien,** O'Brien/Silvestri Construction for our Wildlife Hospital.
- **Allen Thompson** and the **Downtown Marketplace** for donating our booth and hosting SFW events!
- **Jan Collier** and the **TLC Animal Shelter** for lending tables for our events.
- **Modern Mailers** for their invaluable mailing services!
- **ElectroNet** for hosting our web site and e-mail addresses.
- **Durra Quick Print** for donating printing services.
- **A Dent in the Attic** on N. Monroe for storing our "stuff."
- **Native Nurseries' Donna Legare and Jody Walthall** for hosting the Garden Pond drawing & Open House & donating the garden pond & **Bryan Bryson** for his creativity & installation.
- **Kool Beanz Cafe, Chez Pierre and Cabo's** for donating dinners for two to the Pond Event drawing.
- **Skip and Kathy Frink** for donating a weekend at their Old Carrabelle Hotel, [www.oldcarrabellehotel.com](http://www.oldcarrabellehotel.com)
- **Cornell Lab of Ornithology** for donating a subscription to their *Birds of North America Online*, a necessary resource for the serious birder! <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/BNA/>
- **Lorelei Ennis** for her technical help with this newsletter.

- Special thanks to the **Gulf Winds Track Club**, which held their annual **Prefontaine Forest Run** at the Silver Lake Recreation Area on Sept. 24, and race director/ organizer **Jeff Neilsen** for dedicating the proceeds to St. Francis Wildlife and raising over \$1,000 for wildlife!



**Friends flock to Native Nurseries garden party**

On October 6th, Native Nurseries hosted their 2005 Garden Pond Benefit for St. Francis Wildlife. Guests enjoyed organic, shade-grown coffee and delectable, homemade desserts baked by Maryann Bryson, Audrey Alessi, Donna Legare, Mary McMullen, Marianne Duvall, Liz Marshall, Norma Skaggs, Ann Morrow and Linda Mills.

Members of the Leon High School steel-drum band – Ross Holcombe, Johanna Yarbrough, Hunter Daws and John Frank – filled the candlelit Nursery with cool island sounds.

The highlight of the evening was the drawing for a Garden Pond, custom-designed and installed by



Brian Bryson. Koren Taylor held the winning ticket. "Brian did a great job on the pond!" Koren wrote in an e-mail she sent with this photo. "I still can hardly believe I won the pond! Thank you and Native Nurseries for that wonderful benefit idea." Hostess Donna Legare plucked several other tickets out of the basket that night that won dinners for two at Chez Pierre, Kool Beanz Cafe and Cabo's as well as wildlife art prints and other prizes. David Arnold won two nights at the Old Carrabelle Hotel. Thanks and big, bear hugs to Native Nurseries and all our wild friends who donated prizes and purchased drawing tickets. The event raised \$6,100 for St. Francis Wildlife!

PHOTO: Koren Taylor and buddy Taffy relax by their beautiful new pond.

**Happy anniversary, Kate Stratton!**



"Kate loves animals, we know you do great work and I wanted to do something memorable for our 10th anniversary," beamed Scott Stratton.

In appreciation of Scott's very generous donation in honor of the love of his life, Kate received a framed certificate and a visit by Jamaica, a permanently disabled red-tailed hawk.

PHOTO: (L to R) Benjamin, Kate, Nathan (holding a stuffed vulture toy) & Scott Stratton admire Jamaica.

**MEMORIALS**

We have been honored to receive donations in memory of the following who dearly loved wildlife.

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The Gillian Unit of Florida Abuse Registry Hotline  
The District School Board of Leon County - Lincoln High School

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A donation has been made  
**IN HONOR OF**

**Ms. Laura Phipps**

- From  
Ms. Myra A. Hart

### THIS IS BABY BIRD SEASON!

You found a baby bird on the ground. What should you do?



If it is a nestling, naked or with mostly downy feathers, like the baby blue jay in this photo . . .

Replace a fallen nestling in its nest. It is a myth that once you touch a baby bird the parents will not accept it. Most birds have no sense of smell. If the baby is cold, first warm it in your hands. If you can't locate or reach the nest, use a small, plastic berry basket or margarine container. Cut drainage holes, add grass or pine straw and use wire to attach it to the shady side of the closest tree or bush, then gently place the warmed baby bird in the new nest.

If it is a fledgling, covered with body feathers but its tail feathers are still short and stubby . . .

Fledglings exercise their flight muscles by hopping on branches near the nest. Sometimes these "branchers" will fall. Parents protect and feed them on the ground until they can fly.

If it is not in immediate danger from pets or traffic, a fully feathered bird with a short tail hopping on the ground should be left there. Don't put it back in the nest; it will jump out again and may injure itself.

#### When to take a baby bird to St. Francis Wildlife

Whether it is a nestling that you've replaced in a nest or a fledgling you've left on the ground, observe it from a distance for an hour or two. If the parents do not return, or if the baby is injured, place it in a small box, punch air holes in the top and cover it. Keep it warm and quiet and do NOT give it food or water. Birds breathe through a hole in their tongue. Water placed in its mouth will be inhaled. Do not try to raise it yourself. Every species requires a special diet with feedings every 20 minutes! Improperly raised baby birds may imprint on humans, which is a serious, dead-end condition. It is also illegal to possess a wild bird, even a baby, without state and federal permits.

At this point, take it to St. Francis Wildlife as soon as possible. Call us at 850.386.6296, or take it (day or night) to the Northwood Animal Hospital, 1881 N. Martin Luther King Blvd., Tallahassee (across from the Northwood Centre).

To learn more about how to help orphaned wild birds and animals, please come to our WILDLIFE BABY SHOWER!

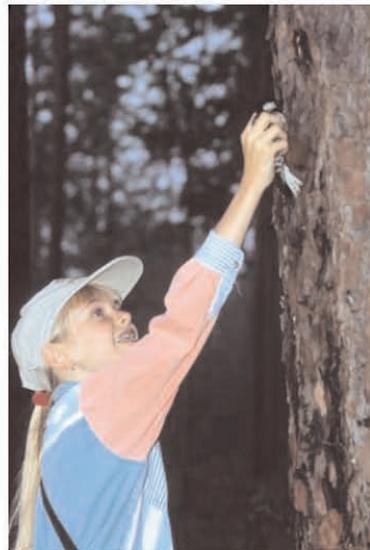
# Pinewoods Bird Festival

## Friday and Saturday, April 7 & 8 At Pebble Hill Plantation

See Georgia's fastest bird, best musician, and most endangered woodpecker



Gates open at 9 AM. Some field trips are space limited, so sign up today on-line.



Rachel Ward releases a Red-cockaded Woodpecker at last year's festival

### Scheduled Activities

(space limited for some events)

- Family Birding with Sandy Beck
- Banding Red-cockaded Woodpeckers with Jim Cox
- Visit Ancient Longleaf Forests
- Kid's Activity Area – Get Your Free Bird House!
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# 3rd Annual WILDLIFE BABY SHOWER

Saturday, March 11, 8 a.m. - 2 p.m.

At The Downtown Marketplace, Ponce de Leon Park at Park Ave. & N. Monroe

This spring and summer, St. Francis Wildlife will receive more than 1,500 orphans. Wild babies need huge quantities of special foods and around-the-clock feedings.

## YOU CAN HELP!

Please donate a GIFT CERTIFICATE to Panhandle Pet Supply.

The good people at PPS give us a deep discount, and your gift certificate enables us to buy what babies need, when they need it.

Gift certificates available on March 11th at our Wildlife Baby Shower and at PPS stores. Or call PPS to purchase a gift certificate for us by phone!



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## Events Calendar

On-line calendar at [www.stfranciswildlife.org](http://www.stfranciswildlife.org)

Please join St. Francis Wildlife at these events.  
 Live birds of prey and reptiles, unique wildlife art and more.

- **Saturday, March 11**  
**Wildlife Baby Shower**  
**8 a.m. - 2 p.m., Downtown Marketplace.**  
 Details on page 3.
- **Friday and Saturday, April 7 and 8**  
**Pinewoods Bird Festival**  
**Historic Pebblehill Plantation**  
 Field trips and special programs fill up fast. To reserve your place, log on to [www.pinewoodsbirdfestival.com](http://www.pinewoodsbirdfestival.com) or call 850.893.4153. Details on page 3.
- **Saturday and Sunday, April 15th - 16th**  
**Conference: "The Value of Animals in Children's Lives."**  
**Tallahassee Community College**  
 A Conference for Parents, Educators, Counselors, and Animal Professionals. Hosted by Catalytic Services, Inc. Engaging national and local speakers [For more information](#), contact Colm McAindriu: [colm11@comcast.net](mailto:colm11@comcast.net), (850) 893-8503 or (850) 591-2757. or log on to: [www.csivisions.com/conferences.html](http://www.csivisions.com/conferences.html)
- **Friday and Saturday, April 21 - 22**  
**Wakulla Wildlife Festival**  
**Wakulla Springs State Park**  
 Celebrate "Earth Week" with live animals, programs and exhibits at beautiful Wakulla Springs. Details at: [www.wakullawildlifefestival.org/](http://www.wakullawildlifefestival.org/)

## 3rd Annual Wildlife Art in the Park

### Saturday, May 13

8 a.m. - 2 p.m.

Downtown Marketplace, Ponce de Leon Park, Park Ave. & N. Monroe St.

This annual gathering of Tallahassee's finest wildlife and nature artists is held each spring to benefit the St. Francis Wildlife Association and their UNCivilized friends.

Also, close-up wild encounters with . . .

- St. Francis Wildlife's hawks, owls, falcons and reptiles.
- Pettable animals from the Tallahassee Museum.
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A silent auction and drawings for unique wildlife art.  
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**Please renew your St. Francis Wildlife annual membership today!**

**Membership Form**  
 (Winter 2006)

**Mail To: St. Francis Wildlife Association**  
**P.O. Box 38160, Tallahassee, FL, 32315**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail address \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_ City \_\_\_\_\_

State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Please check the appropriate boxes and return this form with your tax-deductible donation.

**Membership Levels:**  Chickadee, \$25  Cardinal, \$35  Barred Owl, \$50  Great Blue Heron, \$75  
 Great Horned Owl, \$100  Peregrine Falcon, \$150  Bald Eagle, \$200

Please contact me about:  Volunteering.  Business Partnerships.  Education Programs.