

▶▶▶ FEATURED PLANT

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Common Name: Brittlebush

Scientific Name: *Encelia farinosa*

Brittlebush is a member of the sunflower family and can be found growing on rocky or gravelly slopes and washes within the Sonoran Desert and portions of the Mohave Desert. Its name comes from the brittleness of the stems. It is a compact, dome-shaped, 3 to 4 foot high shrub with yellow flowers on long leafless stalks protruding above the leafy portion of the plant. The leaves are alternate, light greenish-gray to almost white, wooly, and oval to triangle-shaped. The leaves have serrated edges and are 1 to 4 inches long. The leaves are densely covered with short, crooked hairs. These hairs help insulate the plant against heat and cold, help capture moisture and reduce the amount of water lost. The white color reflects sunlight helping to keep the plant cool in the desert environment.

Blooming in early spring the flowers are in branched clusters with 2 inch wide individual flower

heads with a dark yellow to purplish mound of disk-corollas from which radiate 1 inch yellow rays with a lobed, squared off tip. With its gray green leaves and bright yellow flower heads, it is one of the most striking shrubs in the desert mountains and hills. During periods of severe drought and after heavy frosts the leaves will drop off leaving the brownish gray stems to store water until the rain comes. The brittle wood secretes a clear resin that was used by Native Americans as glue and also as a chewing gum. The sap is fragrant and the early Spanish missionaries burned it as an incense in churches, thus the name "Incienso."

Brittlebush does well in backyard landscapes when placed away from irrigation. Be careful not to overwater. The flowers attract butterflies. To encourage repeat flowering you can cut it back some after bloom. It can be easily transplanted and grows well from seed. It has spread dramatically in areas not natural to its distribution



Photo credits: Larger photo (gords_picks)
Inset photo (jonlin)

in large part due to hydroseeding along highways to help stabilize disturbed areas. Kangaroo rats will eat the seed when not much else is available. Mule deer and desert bighorn sheep browse on it.

▶▶▶ FEATURED BIRD

Dan L. Fischer - Author of *Early Southwest Ornithologists, 1528-1900*. Univ. of Arizona Press.

Common Name: Western Screech-Owl

Scientific Name: *Megascops kennicottii*

In early spring, after remaining in concealment within a tree cavity or dense thicket throughout the day, the Western Screech-Owl emerges at dusk to begin nocturnal activities. Usually it begins with a series of loud clear whistled vocalizations, giving the direction of its approximate location. One strikingly distinctive song consists of a sequence of accelerating notes in a cadence resembling an accelerating rhythmic "bouncing ball." Several owl species in this region, often difficult to observe at night, sing respective songs that are important aids in their identification. With this knowledge and when pursuit is hampered it is often unnecessary to observe the bird visually to identify or note its presence. With a wing span of 21" and length of 8.5", this is the larger of seven small owls that occur in southeastern Arizona. Along with two others, it has ear tufts that are prominent when raised. Six larger owls also occur totaling thirteen for the region, therefore this area has the greatest assortment of owl species in the United States.

In Arizona the range of the Western Screech-Owl extends from the lower deserts of saguaro to riparian areas and into the pine-oak woodlands.

They are the most common and widespread of the smaller owls. Their diet consists of prey items including various small to large arthropods, mice, small snakes, and occasionally small birds. Like all owls, they swallow most items whole and regurgitate the indigestible fragments such as insect skeletal parts, bones, fur and feathers in the form of pellets.

Two to four white eggs are generally laid in a natural or old woodpecker cavity in early March. Incubation is at least three weeks and the young fledge in another three to four weeks. They are fed by both parents for about an additional six weeks as they learn to hunt.

The discovery of the Western Screech-Owl was made in Sitka by a group of naturalists, including Robert Kennicott (1835-1866), all employed by the Western Union Telegraph Company attempting to implement and plan for an overland telegraph link from "Russian America" to Siberia. During Kennicott's short life he became such an energetic and exhaustive specimen collector that he suffered two heart attacks, the second proved to be fatal while at Fort Nulato on a bank of the lower Yukon River. One year after his death Alaska was purchased from Russia by the United States and became known as "Seward's folly or icebox."



DAN L. FISCHER

During his life Kennicott contributed hundreds of various scientific specimens to the US National Museum and the Academy of Natural Sciences of Chicago, where he was one of the founders. After receiving a specimen of this owl, Daniel Giraud Elliot (1835-1915), also a founder of the latter institution where he was Curator of Zoology, named the Western Screech-Owl in tribute to Kennicott for his many contributions to science in 1867.