

Owls

By Marianne Taylor. 2012. Cornell University Press (Comstock Publishing Associates), Box 6525, 750 Cascadilla Street, Ithaca, New York 14851-6525 USA. 224 pages, 35.00 USD, Cloth.

In the introduction to *Owls*, British illustrator, photographer, and author Marianne Taylor speculates on the reasons why these birds capture the human imagination so powerfully. She points out that since eye contact is critical to human relations, we are drawn to animals who can return our gaze with two forward-pointing eyes. Most birds, she stresses, have side-mounted eyes for a broader field of vision. She concludes that “owls can truly look at us as we look at them.”

The first section of her book, consisting of nine chapters describing owl diversity and natural history, provides insight into how owls see, and explains additional owl senses, attributes and capacities, hunting behaviour and techniques, habitat, breeding biology, conservation issues, and human-owl relations. The second section of the book offers profiles of 41 individual owl species from around the world.

A discussion of the cognitive capacities of owls early in the book adds significant interest. Owl intelligence is apparently little studied, but research has discovered that Barn Owls form extraordinarily detailed auditory maps in their brains, and that the birds have remarkably accurate memories for sounds and their locations. Berndt Heinrich’s stories of a hand-reared Great Horned Owl learning to wake him for early meals, gently take food from his hands, and play with inanimate objects for hours provide anecdotal evidence of owl intelligence.

Another intriguing fact, described in a later chapter, further demonstrates owl intelligence, specifically the capacity of the birds to solve problems. Taylor writes about the novel way screech owls deal with flies and other small animals attracted to waste in the birds’ nesting cavities. The owls bring live slender blind snakes into the nest to eat the flies, usually leaving the snakes uneaten in return for their services – a fascinating relationship.

Taylor devotes an entire chapter to another relationship, with humans, pointing out that since owls are distributed so widely around the world, most countries have developed distinct owl-related myths and legends. These include owl-like gods and goddesses, owl com-

panions to certain deities, and sundry other links to the supernatural. Some owl symbolism has grown out of the latter connections – for example, early Christian associations of owls with evil, resulting in the unfortunate persecution of owls in related cultures. In other parts of the world, owls – in particular their vocalizations – can be either positive or negative, depending on the type or frequency of the sound

Taylor also writes about owls in literature, television, and film – for example, Winnie-the-Pooh books, Sesame Street, and the Harry Potter series – and about owls in falconry, where they are valued despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that they are known for their reluctance to relinquish prey to their handlers.

The second part of *Owls* starts with a very clear overview of the various owl genera, followed by species profiles describing the bird’s range, evolution, relationships, physical features, geographical variation, movements and migration, voice, habitat, behaviour, hunting-diet, and status-conservation.

This part of the book introduced me to unfamiliar owl species such as the Pharaoh Eagle Owl, a large bird of arid and rocky landscapes in north-west Africa, where it typically nests among rocky structures, including the pyramids. I learned that the Collared Owlet of south-east Asia’s evergreen forests is the continent’s smallest species, but a powerful predator that eats birds up to its own size or even larger – likely the reason it is fiercely mobbed by forest birds when discovered. I was intrigued to read about the fish owls of Asia, who hunt at the water’s edge, and whose diet consists mainly of aquatic animals; unfortunately some of these owls are not well known, while the Blakiston’s Fish Owl of eastern Russia, China, and Japan (north Hokkaido Island) is considered endangered.

Owls is a large and beautiful work of photography and writing. Naturalists intrigued by the mysterious lives and uncanny abilities of owls will find the book, with its comprehensive general introduction to the birds, intriguing facts about individual species, and plentiful photographs a worthwhile addition to their libraries.

RENATE SANDER-REGIER

3, 11th Line, Bristol, Quebec, Canada