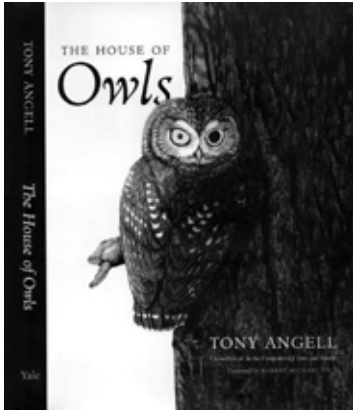


BOOK REVIEWS

Compiled and Reviewed by Chris Siddle

The House of Owls by Tony Angell. 2016. Yale University Press, 302 Temple Street, New Haven, CT, 06511-8909. 18 x 23.5 cm. 202 pages including index. Hard cover. Dozens of black-and-white sketches. Maps. \$31.50 Can.



Several owl books have been published recently, and among them is the outstanding compilation of owl life histories in the *Peterson Reference Guide to Owls of North America and the Caribbean* (Weidensaul 2015) as well as *Owls of the World: A Photographic Guide* (Mikkola 2012), the latter now in its second edition. So, there's a lot of owl information available at the moment. Much of it, however, is reference, not written to be an entertaining narrative.

If you want a highly readable introduction to North American owls, you can do no better than *The House of Owls*. Tony Angell's latest book is remarkably entertaining. Profusely illustrated with Angell's wonderful black-and-white sketches, *The House of Owls* begins with the author's account of sharing his western Washington State acreage with a pair of Western Screech-Owls that had accepted the heavy wooden bird house he had placed next to his house. Spring after spring, a male successfully attracted a female to the box where she laid and incubated the eggs, and cared for the young for about three weeks while being provisioned by the male

who brings her and their chicks caddis fly larvae, carpenter ants, rats, the occasional songbird, and a variety of other small creatures.

This chapter is followed by a very readable introduction to owls' physical features and abilities, habitat preferences, territoriality, behaviour, emotions, silent flight, and keen hearing. This information is accompanied with detailed sketches, including a unique illustration of the distribution of body fat in a Great Horned Owl.

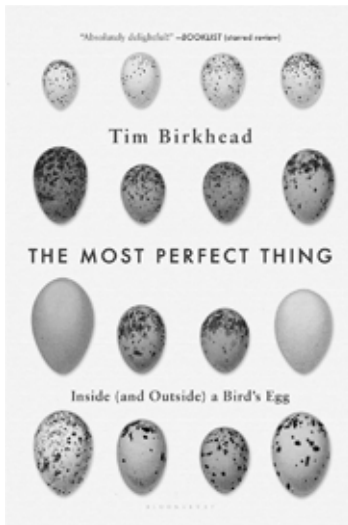
The third chapter concerns owls and human culture, tracing our relationships with owls from paintings of the Eagle Owl (*Bubo bubo*) on prehistorical cave walls in France, through classical Greece where the owl was generally revered as a wise creature. In the Middle Ages the owl was feared as a harbinger of death and was regarded as a mysterious yet powerful bird associated with magicians. This chapter ends with a brief survey of the central role owls have played in indigenous cultures as well as western art.

The remainder of the book is divided into three chapters. Each gives species accounts (3-4 pages apiece) of the owls of North America north of Mexico. Range for the species, habitat, food preferences, vocalizations, courtship, nesting, threats, conservation, measurements (including longevity) are presented with a range map (courtesy of Birds of North America, Cornell University). The chapter "Owls in Company with People" includes Barn Owl, Eastern Screech-Owl, Western Screech-Owl, Northern Saw-whet Owl, Short-eared Owl, Long-eared Owl, Barred Owl, and Great Horned Owl, arguably all of the owls most familiar to most readers. Another chapter, "Owls of Unique Habitat", covers Spotted Owl, Elf Owl, Burrowing Owl, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, Northern Pygmy-Owl, Whiskered Screech-Owl, and Flammulated Owl. The last chapter, "Owls of Wild and Remote Places" includes Boreal Owl, Great Gray Owl, Northern Hawk Owl, and Snowy Owl. The book ends with a six-page bibliography.

What sets Angell's book apart from the many other introductions to owl biology and natural history

is his personal and engaging style that lends the book a narrative quality rare in reference books. He writes of his encounters with owls as a naturalist, artist, raptor rehabilitator, educator, and even as a father of four daughters who shared their childhoods with Tony's owls. *The House of Owls* is an extremely appropriate title because readers feel they have been invited into the Angell home to hear about owls from the man himself as he remembers his encounters with these fascinating birds. Thus, *The House of Owls* is the best introduction to owls I have ever read. **Highly recommended.**

The Most Perfect Thing: Inside (and Outside) a Bird's Egg by Tim Birkhead. 2016. Bloomsbury Publishing Place, 1385 Broadway, 5th Floor, New York, NY 10018. 18 colour photographs. 288 pages. \$32.00 Can.



After 25 years of continuous funding from the Welsh Government, the support for scientist Tim Birkhead's long-term study of Guillemot (Common Murre in North America) was terminated in late 2013 because of budget cuts. Not only did this cancellation mean the end of Tim's life's work but on a less personal level, the end of a long-term study of a bird that is key to understanding the North Atlantic's oceanic ecosystem.

Long-term studies are extremely valuable (but unfortunately quite rare) and as Birkhead states “disproportionately productive” not only because investigators really get to know their study organisms and take a long view, “seeing organisms over a range of environmental conditions: good years, bad years – and ongoing climate change. Perhaps the single most important aspect of long-term studies is that they allow us to investigate environmental problems that we haven't yet even imagined.” And if there is one thing certain about the immediate future of our warming world, it is that there will be unimagined environmental problems cropping up.

In an attempt to raise public awareness of the importance of continuing murre studies, Birkhead collaborated with artist Chris Wallbank to create huge images of murre colonies that were printed on giant rolls of paper and hung from the cliff-like walls of Sheffield University's cathedral for the university's “Festival of the Mind” in September 2014. The display was a hit. The premier science journal *Nature* invited Tim to write an article in which he pleaded for the value of long-term studies in general. The publicity from this launched a successful crowd-sourcing campaign enabling Birkhead to continue his research.

How does his most recent book, *The Most Perfect Thing...*, fit into his story? Quite neatly. Since funding has become an issue, Birkhead has channeled some of his prodigious energies towards explaining ornithology to the general public. His first popular book was *Bird Sense*, a survey of birds' sight, hearing, smelling abilities, etc. *The Most Perfect Thing...*, all about eggs, is the second and is as well written, easily comprehended, and entertaining as *Bird Sense*, if not in some ways even better.

Birkhead uses the Common Murre, which he calls the Guillemot, as the British do, as the centre of his focus, returning again and again to the cliff ledges where these birds precariously incubate their clutches of one egg each year.

He talks about the quintessential early 20th century egg collector, George Lupton, who bought murre eggs from the “climbers”, the local name for those brave and agile residents of Filey and Bridlington who collected the eggs while dangling from long ropes on Bempton cliffs. Lupton amassed

thousands of eggs, especially valuing (and paying the climbers premium price for) odd-ball eggs: elongated, slightly curved, darker or lighter than usual. Egg collecting was a common hobby at the time, but Lupton was unusual among collectors in that he collected only the eggs of this one species, *Uria aalge*.

From Lupton's obsession, Birkhead provides a brief but fascinating history of egg collecting, tracing it back as far as 1617. From there he broadens his scope to include birds in general - not just the ones whose increasingly fragile eggs reside in the drawers of modern museums that have inherited old collections - but some fascinating egg layers like Emperor Penguin, Common Cuckoo, Japanese Quail, Kiwi, Black-legged Kittiwake, Red-cockaded Woodpecker, and many others. He provides clear and interesting explanations of how shells are formed, how eggs are shaped, how and why eggs are coloured, how eggs are created and fertilized, how eggs are incubated, how the chicks forms, and, of course, how the egg hatches: all of these complex processes plainly and simply explained in a book almost as entertaining as a novel. **Highly recommended.**

Better Birding: Tips, Tools & Concepts for the Field by George L. Armistead and Brian Sullivan. 2016. Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, NJ, 08540. 19 cm x 24 cm. Quality paperback. Hundreds of colour photographs. 318 pages. About \$34.00 Can.



The authors of this hefty, very helpful book aim to make you a better birder no matter what your current birding level. The 16-page introduction to this tome presents tried and true techniques that will improve anyone's birding skills. These include urging the birder to study distribution literature ahead of birding so that he or she is prepared for the birds in the area; to study and contribute to *ebird*, the online database operated by Cornell University, and now ubiquitous throughout North America; to learn through the literature and through experience the right place and time for both common species and rarities; to learn to recognize bird vocalizations; to become aware of at least the basics of molt and taxonomy; and finally to bird with a mentor.

The introduction avoids becoming preachy by being brief and moving on to apply some of these techniques to groups of species that can be difficult to identify. Thus the bulk of the book is taken up with tricky-to-identify species like winter loons, swans, Mallards, and monochromatic mallard-like ducks, white herons, eiders, *Brachyramphus* murrelets, Pacific cormorants, sulids, tropical terns, Atlantic gadfly petrels, curlews, godwits, and many others. Troublesome raptors covered include the accipiters and screech-owls. Tricky passerines include House, Cassin's and Purple finches, and marsh sparrows. Other groups include swifts, nighthawks, the "yellow-bellied" kingbirds, crows and ravens, pipits, longspurs, and cowbirds. Empidids and confusing autumn warblers are not covered. Photographs, which are plentiful and generally superb, range from close-ups of kingbirds' outer primaries, through profiles of accipiter heads comparing relative eye sizes and brows, to two-page panoramas of petrels where the reader can compare similar species like Black-capped and Bermuda petrels with Greater Shearwaters which (through computer magic) are all flying across the same patch of ocean.

Text boxes and sidebars explain interesting background information on a wide variety of topics from Whimbrel taxonomy to the nesting habits of North American wrens.

With the current increasing popularity of birding as a hobby for both young people and retirees, *Better Birding...* couldn't have been published at a better time. There is a lot of text to read, but it's written in

a simple, jargon-free style and covers virtually every aspect of bird identification that can be illustrated. There is a Kindle edition for those concerned about book weight. **Highly recommended.**

Winter's Hawk: Red-tails on the Southern Plains by Jim Lish. 2015. University of Oklahoma Press, 2800 Venture Drive, Norman, OK. 73019. (oupres@ou.edu). 19 cm x 24 cm. 166 pages. About 185 colour photographs. Soft cover. \$32.35 Can.



Just before I began drafting this review I was driving through the snow up Silver Star Road just northeast of Vernon. It was during the final days of a long, unusually cold and snowy winter in the Okanagan Valley. Snow had covered the landscape since November and was now multi-layered and glazed hard at its surface. It must be a hard time for wildlife, I mused.

Ahead I could make out two large birds, one atop a utility pole and the other on a Douglas-fir behind the BX fire hall. They were Red-tailed Hawks. The first looked like a standard Western Red-tail (*Buteo jamaicensis calurus*), with a dark throat and a tawny belly. The other, at a distance, was more or less uniformly dark, and may have been the dark morph Harlan's Hawk (*B. j. harlanii*) that had spent the last two winters in the fire hall area.

Bless Red-tailed Hawks, I thought, for we have them with us all winter, after so many of our other birds have left. With their wide diversity of plumages that vary because of colour, age, and race, Red-tails

provide birders with the occasional chance to get to know individually recognizable birds. Early spring and mid-autumn are enlivened by migrant Red-tails that pass through in numbers, winter sees a large population spending the season in the northern Okanagan valley, and all year resident pairs may be seen on their traditional territories.

Although the Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) is a very popular bird (there's at least one Facebook page devoted just to Red-tails), this large, dramatic hawk, common and widespread across much of the continent, has had very few books devoted to it. Thus *Winter's Hawk...* comes as a welcome addition to the relatively sparse Red-tail library. A professor at the Center for Veterinary Health at Oklahoma State University and recognized Red-tail expert, Jim Lish has made a major contribution with his collection of colour photographs and information about the hawks that traditionally winter in north-central Oklahoma. Some Oklahoma birds are resident but many others arrive each autumn from western North America including Alaska-Yukon. When conditions are good a hawk watcher can see as many as 1,100 Red-tails in a 1,000-km drive through areas like Noble, Kay, and Garfield counties in north-central Oklahoma. These "winter hawks" include resident Fuertes and Eastern Red-tails, as well migrant and winter resident Western, Harlan's, and Krider's Red-tails, and even the occasional showy *leucistic* bird. With 40 years of Red-tail Hawk experience, Lish shows us a collection of stunning colour photographs he has captured during long hawk surveys down country roads.

Sixteen chapters cover Red-tail diet and hunting techniques, health and survival, relationship with Bobwhites, diversity of plumages and populations, immaturity, the main subspecies found in an Oklahoma winter, and abnormalities of plumage. Every chapter is profusely illustrated with Lish's superb photographs of hawks perched and flying, resting, and hunting. Sections on identification and separation of races and ages are supplemented with three photographic composites comparing the main subspecies in dark and light morphs and adult and immature plumages in flight.

Lish's writing is plain, easy to read, even informal at times with only a few errors of expression that his editor should have caught. If you intend to

read *Winter's Hawk...*, don't skip the captions which often contain nuggets of information not found in the main text.

Winter's Hawk... is particularly relevant to BC birders, not only because the Red-tailed Hawk is found virtually everywhere in the province as a breeding species, but also because sizable populations winter in Ladner-Delta, the Thompson-Nicola, the North Okanagan, and the Creston Valley, as well as in many other areas. Migrants from Alaska, the Yukon, and northern interior BC pass through the province, including western and Harlan's types as well as perhaps wandering coastal and eastern Red-tails. The photos of Harlan's, western and Krider's types in particular are valuable for the hawk watcher keen to go beyond species-level identification. In addition, the information about winter feeding habitats, territoriality, pair bonds, and responses to poor weather make *Winter's Hawk...* a key reference indispensable to raptor enthusiasts. **Highly recommended.**

Owl: A Year in the Lives of North American Owls by Paul Bannock. 2016. Braided River, 1001 Southwest Klickitat Way, Suite 201, Seattle, WA, 98134. 220 pages. \$41.95 Can.



Paul Bannock is a wildlife photographer who has photographed all 19 owl species found in North America (north of Mexico). He displays a couple of hundred of his images in a publication, which on first glance, seems to be yet another big picture book. However, *Owl: A Year in the Lives...* is much more than just images, stunning though they are. The author includes all 19 species in his book, but concentrates

upon four of them: Northern Pygmy-Owl, Great Gray Owl, Burrowing Owl, and Snowy Owl because these four “exhibit the majority of behaviors at each phase of an owl's life, and represent most of the owls' geographic range and represent much of the variation in owl size and color.”

There are two organizational plans at work in this book. Firstly, the author divides a year in the lives of owls into four subjects: courtship and nest selection, life in the nest, chicks' independence, and winter survival. Each period addresses the behaviours and challenges facing the four focal species, as well as containing images and information about other owls. Secondly, in this main narrative, are a series of sidebar essays about subjects important to an understanding of North American owls, particularly the ecology of habitats and the owls' conservation status. Following each seasonal chapter is a portfolio of full page photographs focusing heavily, but not exclusively, on the four focal species.

Of the 175 photographs, 85 are of Great Grays, Northern Pygmy-Owls, Snowy Owls, and Burrowing Owls and 90 are of the remaining 15 North American species. The most often represented after these are; Short-eared Owls (21 images), Northern Hawk Owls (12), and Long-eared Owls (10), with the small owls of America's southwest with only 3-4 images each.

The quality of all the photographs is outstanding. Paul Bannock is clearly technically proficient, has a strong sense of photographic composition, and, judging from his narrative, is infinitely patient in waiting for photographic opportunities. Most importantly for the welfare of his subjects, Bannock states that he strives to “capture images... with minimum impact” upon the owls. If only pesky paparazzi of Lower Mainland owl photographers would follow Paul's example! As it stands, photographers currently are often highly disruptive around owls, as if the birds' welfare was the last thing on their minds. I am pretty sure that Paul Bannock would condemn this boorish crowd, especially when I read the long list of distinguished owl experts Paul thanks for helping with the book in various ways.

Finally, Bannock's images are almost invariably far more informative of owl's life histories than the usual images one sees of owls perched on poles, fences or tree tops. **Highly recommended.**