

Book Reviews

Book Review Editor's Note: We are continuing to use the current currency codes. Thus Canadian dollars are CAD, U.S. dollars are USD, Euros are EUR, China Yuan Remimbi are CNY, Australian dollars are AUD and so on.

ZOOLOGY

Into the Night: Tales of Nocturnal Wildlife Expeditions

Edited by Rick A. Adams. 2013. University of Colorado Press, 5589 Arapahoe Avenue, Suite 206C, Boulder, Colorado 80303 USA. 194 pages, 26.95 USD, Cloth.

Except in urban settings, most people avoid the night. But humans are not typical mammals, because most species in this class of animals are nocturnal. However, the eight contributors to this edited book on evening wildlife experiences are not your average person, they are biologists and naturalists fascinated with what goes on when the sun goes down.

The first story recounts the camping adventures of naturalist Stephen Jones in the Sandhill prairies of Nebraska. He studies owls, which has brought him in close encounters with these nocturnal birds. They have visited him in the wild on numerous occasions over the past three decades and have been his personal window on nature. The long-eared owl and its survival has been a particularly poignant species for him and is a harbinger for the progress of civilization.

Dr. Frank Bonaccorso is a wildlife biologist who specializes on studying bats. His story focuses on research in Kruger National Park in South Africa and is interspersed with cat and mouse games of avoiding large mammals such as lions and elephants. He puts little transmitters on fruit bats caught in his nets set near big sycamore fig trees – a keystone species that provides food and shelter for many different animals in an otherwise predominantly open grassland region. It turns out that the only mammal capable of self-powered flight eats a lot of fruits but also is a good disperser of seeds that pass through the digestive tract and are defecated while flying. So I suppose one more thing to watch out for during the night but not a potentially life threatening danger as other things that lurk in the night.

Although not all exclusively nocturnal, the tales of diving in the Galapagos by Christina Allen are certainly dark and mysterious, especially when sharks come into play. But there are two incidents she shares of night time experiences. One is being mesmerized by a mass of bioluminescent marine organisms seen during the first evening on her research vessel that is investigating changes to the island archipelago since Darwin's time. The other is a night dive to find the bizarre and aptly named red-lipped batfish flapping on the ocean floor.

The fourth chapter is written by the editor of the book, Dr. Rick Adams, who is a biology professor at the University of Northern Colorado and a bat researcher. Most of his stories take place in the nearby Rocky Mountains, up to around 4,000 metres in elevation, as he studies the distribution, abundance, and resource use of bats. Some experiences were eerie, such as ghostly images lurking in the shadows, but others were humorous, such as the trailer-eating porcupine that wakes up his field team in the middle of the night.

The next writer takes us to Sulawesi and macaque monkeys, but also reveals her distain for mosquitoes. Dr. Ann Kohlhaas is a professor of biology at California State University in Stanislaus but dreams of her fieldwork in southeast Asia. But it's more than just primates, as she reminisces of wildlife encounters with bats, rats, and snakes. And there are also potentially threatening encounters with earthquakes and malaria.

More tropical adventures are told by Dr. Lee Dyer, a biologist at the University of Nevada in Reno. But these ones take place on the other side of the world in Costa Rica and Ecuador. They are equally as odd with stories of fellow field biologists getting high one night on the local flora and stripping naked before walking into a web of thousands of spiders. Another time after a long night's work, the author gets bit by "a big red and hairy spider" on his private parts and blood is drawn. It ends happily when he wakes up, after stumbling back to his cabin and passing out, to see the stars are still shining.

Not to be left out, a desert encounter with a rattlesnake is told by Dr. James Halfpenny while studying packrats that have been dusted with a fluorescent powder enabling them to be tracked at night to find their middens and hopefully also the beetles they eat that are good indicators of historical changes in climate. But he also tells of snowy adventures as far north as the Arctic, where "nocturnal" work and avoidance of polar bears takes place in the "land of the midnight sun".

The final chapter is left to bat biologist Dr. Scott Pedersen at South Dakota State University in Brookings. He gets to do fieldwork on the Caribbean island of

Montserrat. But it is not all paradise, as he has to deal with erupting volcanoes and pooping bats at night. However, he does survive to give us a recipe for “mountain

chicken stew”, which is actually a big frog for you foodies out there.

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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.

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Lim, Burton K. 2014. "Into the Night: Tales of Nocturnal Wildlife Expeditions, ed. Rick A. Adams [Review]." *The Canadian field-naturalist* 128(1), 91–92.
<https://doi.org/10.22621/cfn.v128i1.1529>.

View This Item Online: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/304974>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22621/cfn.v128i1.1529>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/353508>

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