

Nocturnal Icons of a Natural History Observer

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Book Review

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The House of Owls, Tony Angell. Yale University Press, New Haven & London (2015). 203 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0300203448. Hardback \$20.35, Kindle \$14.99 (U.S.).

The House of Owls is at once a personal journal of natural history and a mild reference volume to the nocturnal forms that sparked that exploration.

The volume begins with a namesake chapter “The House of Owls,” with author Angell taking you into his first home, north of Seattle, recounting his early relationship with a pair of Western Screech-owls for whom he built a nest box and, with his wife and twin daughters, observing their seasonal rituals of fledging two owlets. The next chapter, “About Owls,” provides a more objective narrative of the evolution, biology, and ecology of owls, although punctuated still by his first-person narrative observations that contribute to interpreting various species’ otherwise recondite activities and that allow the author to provide his personal ideas for conservation.

Chapter Three on “Owls and Human Culture” orbits close to my own work and interests in owls in myth and lore. Here, the narrative skips quickly through brief, selected examples of cultural beliefs and traditions associated with owls over the ages—many of which are familiar, such as the Greek goddess Athena being depicted with an owl, or recounting lines of *The Owl and the Pussy-cat*. As an overview, it could spark further interest into this realm, such as with Desmond Morris’ 2009 volume *Owl* with its more extensive chapters on the role of owls in human cultures and societies. But like Morris’ volume, Angell’s presents stories of owl lore apparently recounted from other, secondary sources, and in anthropology this can be troublesome if it repeats or rewords undocumented accounts without strict academic foundation.

The final three sections comprise one-third of the book with individual accounts of the 19 owl species of North America, each providing a general description, range and habitat, food preferences, vocalizations, courtship and nesting, threats and conservation, and vital statistics of size and weight. These species accounts generally begin with Angell’s personal narratives of encounters, or with revisiting the cultural history of the species. These three sections divide the species accounts into “Owls in Company with People,” “Owls of Unique Habitat,” and “Owls of Wild and Remote Places,” providing a unique but rather forced classification; arguably, most species could fit into any of these sections. The accounts are accurate and include the expected range maps. However, this is neither a purely scientific treatise nor a birder’s guide.

The volume is also a rich showpiece for Angell’s artwork with copious monochromatic illustrations of owls of all species, many drawings showing specific and interesting behaviors such as a Western Screech-owl on perch about to take a crayfish, or a Cooper’s Hawk pursuing a Saw-whet Owl. The artwork complements the narratives, although not necessarily for scientific use, and some depict Angell’s interpretations of owl encounters such as a Great Horned Owl about to strike a windshield as viewed by the driver.

This is not Angell’s first foray into recounting owl biology, nor my first encounter with his work, as I discovered in my own library his earlier slim 1974 volume sleekly entitled *Owls* of similar format and content.

Descriptions intermittently lapse into anthropomorphism, such as viewing owlet nestlings as his own young, curious daughters (p. 22), or the singing of male screech-owls as a “classic Italian opera” (p. 56).

So what is this volume? It is not strictly for scientists or researchers; for example, there are no citations of sources but for a 5½ page bibliography at the end that lists mostly other books

and compendia rather than primary scientific or anthropological literature. It is also not particularly suitable for classroom study use. The book is more a personal journey and a fusion of exploration and art. But in that wells a vital lesson for science, for science must begin with such keen observation and commitment and the exposition of natural history. We can thereby excuse the lapses into anthropomorphisms sprinkled throughout the chapters, if such metaphors spark greater interest and concern for understanding owls and for their conservation. Between the lines can be read a personal tension of wanting to house, hold, and know owls intimately, yet realizing that they best thrive on their own if afforded habitat and opportunity. To this end speaks Angell's line on

p. 16, "...it was important to respect the boundaries that set us apart, to keep them wild and prepared to take care of themselves in a dangerous world."

As a wildlife biologist who has himself rehabilitated a Western Screech-owl and studied many other owl species of the world as a "student of strigids," I invite other researchers to rekindle their passion for natural history with this book. Recommended.

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