

BOOK REVIEWS

Owls of the Eastern Ice: A Quest to Find and Save the World's Largest Owl, by Jonathan C. Slaght. 2020. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York. 348 pp. \$28.00, e-book \$14.99, audio book \$24.99. ISBN: 978037422848.

It was on a flight over the Primorye, a Russian province formerly part of Manchuria, abutting North Korea and China, that Jonathan Slaght recalls falling in love with the Russian Far East, and particularly Primorye. Straddling the Sea of Japan, it is a mysterious mountainous Russian province that during the Soviet era was off limits to foreigners for military reasons, and the exotic wild home of the Amur Tiger and Amur Leopard.

With the breakup of the Soviet state and its opening to outsiders, Slaght returned for several visits, one for three years as a Peace Corps volunteer. It was while out hiking in 2000 that he encountered his first Blakiston's Fish Owl, the world's largest owl, endangered and likely down to under 2500 individuals.

Thankfully, Slaght's sighting made a strong impression on him and led to choosing this species for his Ph.D. research project. His *Owls of the Eastern Ice* is a well-written and well-edited tale of his 20 months of field work as well as his love and appreciation of this poorly known corner of Russia and the area's people.

Blakiston's Fish Owl has been more extensively studied in Japan, where in recent decades conservationists have managed to reverse a population decline on the island of Hokkaido. In Russia, it occurs in more remote areas and until recently received less attention. Its status in China is not well known. Slaght notes that a nest had not been discovered in Russia till 1971, and the country's population was thought to be a total of 300–400 pairs.

Slaght understood that with the commercial opening of the Russian Far East the future of this rare species was at risk, and it would be critically important to have good conservation science inform decisions being made about timber harvests, roads, fishing, and other forms of resource extraction.

For his Ph.D. research at the University of Minnesota, under Rocky Gutiérrez, Jonathan Slaght selected a project focused on understanding what landscape features the fish owl requires. The intent was to be able to help develop a conservation strategy for the species that could guide management decisions to safeguard the fish owl and the entire ecosystem.

Several factors were key to Slaght's ultimate success. First was his collaboration with Sergey Surmach, an ornithologist with the Federal Scientific Center of East Asian Terrestrial Biodiversity, whose collaborative spirit and experience in the rigors of remote field work were key to Slaght's success. Surmach is credited for his knowledge of the fish owl, Primorye, and logistical magic. Second, Slaght clearly is talented, tenacious, and was able to build on his previous experience as a Peace Corps volunteer in Primorye. Finally, he seems to bring a Zen-like patience in the face of failures, and dry humor to his encounters with field and village life in the remote Russian wilds.

Owls of the Eastern Ice is a field-work adventure tale that does not bog down in field work (though occasionally it is hard to keep the various river basins and associated owl pairs straight). Slaght has a keen eye for the people he works with and a generous spirit for the rigors of eking out a living on this Russian frontier. It is a good story, and Slaght's writing gives us a front row seat to field life in Russia: "the room grew smoky from both tobacco and the sieve-like woodstove. I sat in for a few shots of ethanol, eating meat and raw onion, and listening to the men impress one another with stories of hunts and close encounters with bears, tigers and the river" (p. 23). Along the way Slaght learns critical survival skills: "I had learned that silence was the best policy when encountering strangers, especially drunken ones,

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as the most common reaction to meeting a foreigner was demands of communal vodka ingestion to facilitate a lengthy exploration of cultural differences” (p. 128). He is committed to the living in close quarters and rough field conditions with his field crew that he needed to succeed, however challenging: “Everyone on the field crew snored, but he (Katkov) was a virtuoso” (p. 242). Undoubtedly humor is an important bridge to his success: “He fueled his monologues with sausage and cheese, then belched zeppelins of aroma into that confined space” (p. 268).

Slaght tells his story not as an expert but as a student gaining experience and knowledge in the field with others. His perspective is refreshing, as he is not afraid to share near misses with disaster on river ice while learning to trap owls through trial and error.

Most importantly, his work is driven by a passion to better understand fish owls and their use of Primorye’s riverine habitats. His project’s GPS tracking of fish owls and vegetation mapping has helped illuminate the species’ habitat needs and its home range over the course of a year.

These owls need dense broadleaf or mixed broadleaf/coniferous forest with old-growth trees suitable for nesting. They need clear braided rivers with channels of slow-moving water, particularly segments that do not freeze over in the cold Russian winters. While nesting the owls do not have a particularly large range, but they move seasonally, particularly in the autumn, to follow fish migration upstream. This work has allowed Slaght and his collaborators to map out potential habitat. Not surprisingly, once his maps are overlaid on logging companies’ leases, he recognizes the need to engage with these companies directly. He points to some success working with companies in protecting nesting trees and closing roads into fish owl habitat.

Slaght’s work is an inspiring example of a scientist’s commitment to in-depth field work to develop and analyze data in order to guide the conservation of a poorly known species in the face of rapid transformation of its territories. He is also a scientist who is a close student of people, the key driver threatening the fish owl. He has found a way to remain living and working in Primorye and recognizes that the fish owl’s conservation is a long-term commitment. His work helped double the population estimated for Russia to perhaps 735 pairs (800 to 1600 individuals). Yet Slaght is not naïve about the threats the fish owl faces, from natural (typhoons) to anthropogenic (collisions with vehicles, poaching, habitat loss, and a likely reduced prey base). He notes that in Russia the fish owl’s clutch sizes have declined over time, likely reflecting a decline in its prey.

While Slaght’s current work with the Wildlife Conservation Society is not focused on Blakiston’s Fish Owl directly, he continues to moonlight with Surmach and others to both study and advocate for conservation of old-growth riparian forest. His parting reminder: “like the owls, we’ll have to stay vigilant.” For anyone working on conservation, there are no truer words, even on a good day.

[Editor’s Note: Subsequent to submission of *Owls of the Eastern Ice* for review in *Western Birds*, this book was nominated for the 2020 National Book Awards and was feted as one of the best books of 2020 by notable organizations and publications. Slaght is the English-language editor of the Far-eastern Journal of Ornithology and writes a guest column/blog for Scientific American, East of Siberia.]

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“**The Hungry Bird**,” a series of columns by David Leatherman, published in *Colorado Birds*, the journal of Colorado Field Ornithologists, 2010–2019, all available at <https://cobirds.org/Publications/HungryBird.aspx>.

Many books consist of a collection of essays. Here I review a set of essays that could well have been assembled in a book but were instead published in *Colorado Birds*, the quarterly journal of the Colorado Field Ornithologists. For ten years, from 2010 to 2019, one of that organization’s prominent members, David Leatherman, wrote a regular column titled “The Hungry Bird,” whose stated goal was to provide uncommon background deepening insight into bird observations. He did this by using his experience as an entomologist and professional field biologist to better understand birds through their behavior, what they eat, and who eats them.

David Leatherman obviously knows how to write for professional scientists. But throughout this decade of columns, he shows remarkable skill in writing simultaneously for amateurs without losing accuracy and reliability. He focuses on a species of insect, plant, or bird adaptation, and then with intriguing details weaves a story around it that educates while it fascinates. His ability to use personal stories, metaphors, and similes is well honed.

As I read his 37 columns, I tried to peruse them from the point of view of both a professional scientist and an amateur birder, and I found myself regularly engrossed in the subject of that issue. For me, 22 of the columns were of “Oh my!” quality. Standout articles that best walk the line between these two types of readers include “Dragonflies” (July 2011), “A Loggerhead Larder” (October 2015), and “Breakfast at Jane’s” (July 2016). I rank as the best of all “Birds Exploring Defect as a Proven Foraging Strategy” (April 2016). Each of these essays has a clear story that tied birds into what and how they eat specific types of food. In the case of my favorite, it revealed how a birder could learn to see what a bird sees and judge food availability by the appearance of clues such as insect-damaged and dried leaves.

When I looked for details that distinguish the best columns, I noticed a direct relationship between the number of inserted citations, use of scientific names, formal family names, and a general drift into a more standard scientific writing style. My amateur birder self was not as enthralled in wading around the articles of a more formal style, such as “What Kind of Food Would a Woodcock Find, if a Woodcock Could Find Food?” (April 2015). It had 11 citations, a somewhat disconnected introduction, unnecessary lists of formal family names, and a more affected presentation. “Solifuges” (October 2016) had an overwhelming 22 citations and no photo or illustration of the subject organism. “Green Ash Seeds” (April 2017) had a mind-boggling 56 citations and long lists of mammals’ scientific names that distracted me from the central message of the article.

Overall, however, it amazes me how well these columns were written, the ideas on which they were based, and the messages they communicate to scientists and birders. I don’t know how many authors would be able to conjure up such a plethora of intriguing connections to make birds more understandable. My hat is off to Leatherman and *Colorado Birds* for an overall productive set of columns from which amateurs and professionals can continue to harvest insights and novel ideas that enhance our knowledge and appreciation of birds.

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Photography: Birds: Field Techniques and the Art of the Image, by Gerrit Vyn. 2020. Mountaineers Books, Seattle, 256 pp. ISBN: 978-1-68051-099-7.

Catherine Waters of the Western Field Ornithologists called me to ask if I would review a book on bird photography, and specifically if I thought it was of suitable content for an average birder. As any experienced tour leader can attest, birders and bird photographers share a love of birds, but the similarities end there. Upon seeing an interesting bird, the birder will watch it, maybe make notes, snap a few photos, and move on to find the “next one.” Bird photographers want to stay there, continuing to photograph the bird until it leaves or they have recorded the best possible images that the bird and the scene will allow them. That is why many of the birding tour companies are now running tours dedicated to bird photographers.

I assume that Catherine chose me because I started birding as a photographer back in the 1970s-era of manually controlled 35-mm film cameras, and have happily made the transition to the world of digital SLR cameras and being a birder. To me, the most remarkable development in birders and birding over the past two decades is without a doubt the embracing of photography for documentation, record-keeping, and personal enjoyment. In 2020, a records committee expects to receive photos of a rare bird, whereas in the 1970s, a detailed field sketch was the birder’s “proof” of what he or she saw. Digital SLR cameras with 100- to 400-mm zoom lenses, superzoom point-and-shoot cameras, and cell phones taking images through spotting scopes have completely changed the landscape when it comes to reporting and documenting bird records.

The book arrived—*Photography: Birds*, subtitled *Field Techniques and the Art of the Image*, by Gerrit Vyn, in partnership with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Published by Mountaineers Books, which publisher also has in its catalog *Photography: Outdoors* and *Photography: Night Sky*, so these books are definitely intended for dedicated photographers.

However, the image on the front cover really got my attention—not a Great Gray Owl, Golden-cheeked Warbler, or Roseate Spoonbill (all superb images featured within the body of the book), but a ground-level photo of a juvenile Sharp-tailed Sandpiper! OK, maybe this will be suitable for birders after all!

Gerrit Vyn has a long and impressive résumé for bird photography, and the images that he has included in the book are outstanding. I would imagine that the hardest part of writing the book was deciding which images to include and which ones would not make the cut. He relates that his first efforts at bird photography were with his father’s Nikon F3 35mm camera during spring migration at Point Pelee National Park in Ontario, Canada. That connected with me, as I did the same, only it was a Nikon Ftn Photomic with a 500-mm f/8 Reflex-Nikkor lens at Point Pelee in 1977.

After the Introduction, the first section is entitled Ethics, which includes a very complete round-up of how to get the bird photos you desire while keeping the birds safe and respecting the natural environment. Excellent. The next six chapters are meant to be a resource for the reader—finding birds, understanding bird behavior, choosing equipment to do the job at hand, operating that equipment in the field, and making creative decisions with respect to composition, exposure, and effects. The book finishes with Vyn’s thoughts on post-processing routines and techniques.

The book encapsulates virtually everything you will need to know about how to gear up, find, and photograph birds. All the bird-image captions include the lens used, exposure data, and location of the bird, but not the specific camera body. Vyn shares my own outlook—the lens is the most important part of the system, not the camera body. The book not meant to be a step-by-step instructional or self-help guide to becoming a better photographer. That task is left to the reader. Vyn states from the beginning that the information presented is what works for *him*, and the specific gear shown and discussed are his preferences. Fair enough. A beginning

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or non-photographer will likely benefit from a glossary of photographic terms, but making the effort to become familiar with those terms is a rite of passage for any photographer.

Here is where we can be sure that the book is *not* intended for birders—Vyn is a big-lens guy. There are roughly 100 bird photos included in the text, and all are tack-sharp, impeccably framed, and properly exposed. Two lens combinations dominate the photos: 41 images were taken through a 600-mm *f*/4 with a 1.4× teleconverter, and 20 images were taken through a 500-mm *f*/4 lens with a 1.4× teleconverter. These are not birder-friendly, being larger and heavier than what an average birder is willing to carry.

Evidently, Vyn has at some point switched between Canon and Nikon systems, as those are the ones he refers to in the sections on gear and field techniques. He is obviously familiar and comfortable with them, and does not seem to have a specific brand preference.

That is my only criticism of the book—I was surprised at the complete lack of acknowledgment or discussion of the newest type of digital camera, the mirrorless camera, pioneered by Panasonic, followed by Olympus and Sony. The industry giants Canon and Nikon finally debuted their models in 2019. Presumably, Vyn has not had the chance to use either of those camera bodies in the field. I forecast that mirrorless cameras will in fairly short order do to traditional DSLR bodies what digital did to 35-mm film—relegate it to the niche user or stubborn traditionalist.

Conclusion: An excellent overview of photography as it pertains to wild birds, especially for photographers looking to raise their game. It is definitely a great resource for any birder who wants to get better bird photos, but do not expect to see tips on bird identification, using superzoom cameras, digiscoping, or phonescoping.

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