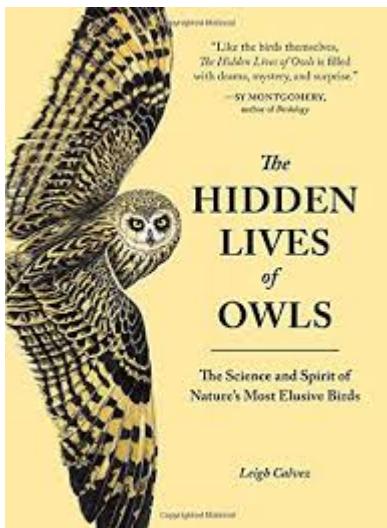


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The Hidden Lives of Owls – Evergreen Audubon

5-6 minutes



In *The Hidden Lives of Owls: The Science and Spirit of Nature's Most Elusive Birds*, Leigh Calvez recounts her adventures learning about owls, many of which she was seeing for the first time. She teams up with leading owl experts, especially in the Pacific Northwest, to visit the locations of eleven species.

Human interest in owls goes back a very long time. In the Australia outback, one tribe believes that Gordon the Owl first created the world. Hunter-gathers in Europe carved a Long-eared Owl in the 32,400 year old Chauvet Cave in France. The Greek goddess of wisdom, Athena, was associated with an owl. The Sami people in northern Scandinavia believe that owls are good

luck. In South Africa, native people associated owls with witchcraft and bad luck.

Owls have been around for the past 67 million years. They inhabit every possible habitat from the extreme arctic, to deserts, to forests. To survive in all these places, they've developed special characteristics like tubular eyes that face forward. Their eyes have more black-and-white cones, helping them see well in the dark. Their round faces and asymmetric ears enable them to hear voles moving under feet of snow. Their specialized feathers let them fly almost completely silently. Their talons have something like opposable thumbs to help them grasp wriggling prey.

Calvez is so fascinated by owls that she decides to make a special project to learn as much about them, especially the ones near her home on Bainbridge Island, WA. She begins her account with the tiny Northern Saw-whet Owl, just six to eight inches from head to tail. Saw-whet Owls can be found in the Bear Creek drainage, although they are much easier to hear than to see. The same can be said of all of the small owls like the Boreal, Northern Pygmy, and Flammulated owls, all of which can be found in Colorado.

Calvez finds her first Saw-whet Owl on an owling trip at 2 am. Her first Saw-whet sighting is quick. The tiny owl lands briefly in a nearby fir and is quickly gone again. Calves is a scientist and naturalist, with her work has focused on whales, which inspired her to look for spirit bears, bengal tigers, polar bears, and even coyotes. Exploring the winged world of owls was simply the next step.

The Hidden Life of Owls covers eleven species: Northern Saw-Whet, Flammulated, Snowy, Northern Spotted, Barred, Burrowing, Northern Pygmy, Long-eared, Short-eared, Great Gray, and Great Horned Owls. All but three of these, the Northern Spotted Owl, the Great Gray Owl, and the Barred Owl, are found in Colorado. We have our own Spotted Owl, the Mexican.

The Barred Owl is a relative newcomer to the western US, moving into the Pacific Northwest about a hundred years ago. They followed the settlers tree-plantings to cross the prairies, just as we've seen other species like the Blue Jay moving into Colorado. The Barred Owls found the clear-cut forests in the Pacific Northwest a welcoming new habitat because the disturbed areas eliminated their predators, the Northern Goshawk and the Great Horned Owl. The clear-cuts also caused the near extinction of the other primary occupant, the Northern Spotted Owl. Barred Owls, Calvez tells us, are opportunistic birds with a wide range of prey species. They even prey on several species of small owls.

Now the more aggressive Barred Owls outnumber the less aggressive Spotted Owls four to one. A controversial program has been put in place to cull Barred Owls in some areas to give Spotted Owls an opportunity to recover. However, since the Barred Owls moved in as a result of human activity, some see it as fitting for humans to help give Spotted Owls their chance. Hard to tell, of course.

Leigh Calvez's *The Hidden Life of Owls* is particularly entertaining to read because she describes the adventures she has looking for and finding the owls. Her stories of hunting for a

Snowy Owl in Barrow, Alaska, reminds us of the bird's amazing ability to withstand frigid temperatures. She travels by ATV with Snowy Owl expert, Matt Larson, to check on a slowly developing female owlet that is being fed by her father. She finds herself cradling a baby Snowy Owl. The baby has fluffy down mingled with adult feathers, which means she still cannot fly. But she is feisty enough to bite Calvez's hand, which suggests to Larson that she has a chance, as long as the father stays around to help her.

You will enjoy following Calvez's adventures, as she begins to understand that the owls provide her with a way of "knowing something more" about her world than she has known before. She begins to learn to think like an owl.

In case you haven't heard yet, we are starting an Evergreen Nature Book Club, so that everyone gets a chance to read and discuss some of the great books you've read about in these reviews. Let me know at joann (at) jhackos (dot) com if you're interested in joining. Our first meeting is January 25, 2017.