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Owl: A Year in the Lives of North American Owls – Evergreen Audubon

6-8 minutes



I attended Paul Bannick's talk about owls at the February 2017 meeting of the Denver Field Ornithologists. The talk was fascinating, and the opportunity to get a signed copy of his new book couldn't be passed up. Many of the slides Bannick used in his talk are among the 200 plus images that appear in the book. But it's not a coffee-table, picture book. It is an account of the year in an owl's life, featuring four owls: North Pygmy-Owl, Great Gray Owl, Burrowing Owl, and Snowy Owl. Yes, the photographs are spectacular but certainly not secondary to the story.

Bannick's experience with owls began when he found a Snowy Owl atop a telephone pole near his boyhood home. He began to learn about the 19 owls that call North America (north of Mexico) home. The text is divided into four sections: Courtship and nest selection, Life in the nest, Gaining independence, and Surviving

the winter. At the end of the book is a fairly comprehensive field guide.

Courtship and nest selection

With all the owls around Evergreen, most of us know that owls begin nesting in the dead of winter. The pair of Great-horned Owls in Bergen Park appeared in early February. The female was sitting on the nest by early March. Bannick notes that owls are primarily solitary except when they come together to mate. Some species, like our Bergen pair, apparently come together again in the same location each year if the nest site is available. Others like the Northern Hawk Owl range over hundreds of miles through the year, choosing a nest site and finding a new mate each season.

Owls attract their mates through a series of advertising calls, including hoots, whistles, toots, and trills. Short-eared Owls sky dance. Spiraling up to more than a thousand feet at times and then descending in short dives, the Short-eared Owls hoot and clap their wings. They nest in lots of different places, including man-made structures. Some owls like to nest at the top of a snag, one reason to keep standing snags on your land. Many small owls prefer cavities carved out by woodpeckers, which includes aspens in our conifer forests. Others, like the Burrowing Owl, nest in tunnels or on the ground.

Bannick treats us to a detailed account of the courtship behavior of one of our local owls, the Northern Pygmy-Owl. At one time, he spent every weekend for three months watching and photographing these owls, observing their behavior from 5:30 am to 8 pm. That's dedication!

Life in the nest

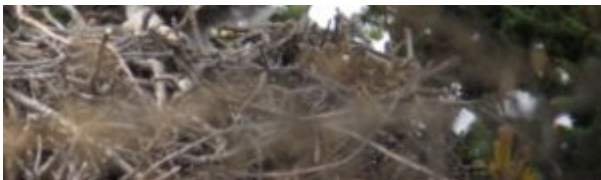


Great Grey Owl (c) JoAnn Hackos

Owls are prey specialists. Some prefer small mammals like voles and mice; others prefer insects; still others hunt anything they can find. What they hunt is revealed by the appearance of their faces. Those with facial disks, like the Barn Owl, hunt by using their hearing. Northern Pygmy-Owls, which don't have a distinct facial disk, hunt by sight. They also have shorter wings that let them pursue prey among trees.

In this section, we learn about clutch size and incubation of the eggs. Bannick includes many pictures of owlets, which often are different sizes, having hatched on an uneven schedule. The larger female owls incubate and brood the young while the smaller male hunts. At about two weeks, the owlets have a coat of gray or brown feathers. By four weeks, the young owls are practicing using their wings and hopping around the nest.





Great Grey owllet (c) JoAnn Hackos

Bannick's account of the Great Grey Owl's nesting behavior meant watching a female in the Oregon Cascades. This owl never leaves her nest, even when accosted by pesky ravens and aggressive goshawks. Bannick once spent more than eight hours in a blind thirty feet up waiting for the female Great Grey to even twitch. He watched this same owl use her talons to strike an erstwhile black bear that came too close.

Gaining independence

Young owls leave the nest when they can fly or are almost ready to fly. As they grow bigger and eliminate more waste, the nest becomes increasingly less safe. They must leave the nest as soon as possible to escape predation. While the young of ground-nesting owls can simply walk away, owls that are born in nests high in trees must make a first leap. They flap and flutter to the ground and then walk away with the parents, usually toward areas that have abundant prey.

Bannick sets up a blind to watch the Burrowing Owls in a grassland in Kansas and finds them difficult to photograph as families. He watches eleven little owls emerge from a burrow and stand shoulder to shoulder. Is it one family or many? In dense prairie dog colonies, the young owls are safer from predators because of the watchful mammals. The owls themselves use elevated perches to watch for predators.

Young Burrowing Owls mature quickly. At two weeks, they are

already curious, tilting or rotating their heads to see what's around. They learn to run, diving into their burrows when threats appear. At four weeks, they are beginning to fly and do some of their own hunting.

Surviving the winter

Bannick explains just how challenging it is for owls to survive the winter by finding the food they need to survive. Some migrate hundreds or thousands of miles south to winter areas. Others search for territories where winter prey are abundant, which also sometimes means thousands of miles of wandering. In Colorado, we have witnessed the appearance of wandering Snowy Owls looking for food on the winter prairie.

Owls must take chances to find enough food to survive. Bannick reports seeing three Barn Owls in a group of cottonwoods with two Great Horned Owls, their natural predators. Potential starvation makes strange bedfellows.

Snowy Owls survive the extreme low temperatures and darkness in the Arctic. Some remain in their breeding territories if they find sufficient prey. Others move north, even going out to sea to prey on seabirds like Eiders. Others, as we have experienced in Colorado, head south to the Great Plains, often when a large number of young owls survive a good prey season.

In addition to the four major sections, Bannick adds vignettes on special topics, usually with stunning photographs. You will find habitat descriptions of arctic tundra, southwest drylands, boreal forests, and western mountain meadows.

Certainly, get a copy of Bannick's Owls for the photographs, but

don't neglect the interesting and very personal story he has to tell.

Paul Bannick

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