

ANIMALS

Owls of the World: A Photographic Guide.

By Heimo Mikkola. 2012. Firefly Books. (ISBN 9781770851368). 512 pp. Hardcover. \$49.95.

“A wise old owl sat on an oak;
The more he saw, the less he spoke;
The less he spoke, the more he heard;
why aren't we like that wise old bird?”

– Author Unknown

Upon first glance, the photography in this book is stunning. Any book attempting to document the many species of the Order Strigiformes would have to rely on a formidable collection of photographs, and this book weighs in with 750 of them. The author does state that 14 of the species have apparently not been photographed at all, but for five of these, they have included photographs of skins held in the Natural History Museum at Tring, England. The photographs in the book include the different color morphs when available, as well as juvenile plumage and in-flight shots.

The book opens with an overall description of what makes an owl unique, from their frontally situated eyes and broad facial disc to their ability to rotate their head through nearly 270°. The book covers their exceptional hearing due to their large, half-moon shaped vertical ear slits. Apparently, “laboratory tests have shown that the Barn Owl’s sense of hearing is some ten times better than that of humans.” Some species possess asymmetrical ear openings that help them better pinpoint the source of prey sounds to better help them hunt – even through several inches of snow in cases. There is a fascinating look at the softened

fringes at the outer edges of their wings that may hint at their amazing ability for silent flight. The section further explores shape and size, calls, plumage, breeding, and longevity. It concludes with taxonomy, evolution, owls and humans, conservation, and a list of now extinct owls. The author also provides a listing of owl associations, research organizations, and Internet resources.

The real meat of the book, though, is dedicated to species accounts for each of the 249 species of owls throughout the world. Each species is numbered, and this numbering system is used throughout the accounts for cross referencing. Each account provides information for common and scientific names, measurements and weight, alternative names, identification (including color morphs and plumage as well as juvenile and in-flight descriptions), calls, food and hunting, habitat, status and distribution (to be used in conjunction with the accompanying distribution maps), geographic variation, and similar species listings. One listing that particularly stuck with me was the Eurasian Eagle Owl with its prey, a female mongoose, which weighs in nearly three times the size of the owl. The layouts for the species accounts really lend themselves to easy referencing – no small feat considering the large amount of information covering such a wide spectrum of species.

The introduction of the species accounts provides further useful information, including typical owl topography, a listing of abbreviations, and a glossary featuring owl-specific terminology. The listings break up the two families of owls (Tytonidae for the barn and masked owls and Strigidae for all the others) by genera. While this doesn’t make it easy for the more casual reader, the index in the back of the book does list the owls by both scientific and common names.

The difficulty of creating such a thorough compilation of the world’s species of owls cannot be taken lightly. The book is set up well for birders, naturalists, and for fans of these amazing birds of prey. For a high school setting, the book would serve well as a reference for an ecological or taxonomic project. At the same time, elementary students like my daughter can easily get lost in looking through all the different species, and the information is presented in a way that is easy to understand and appreciate.



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Weird Sea Creatures. By Erich Hoyt. 2013. Firefly Books. (ISBN 9781770851917). 64 pp. Paperback. \$9.95.

This volume’s slimness is deceiving: the 64 pages of *Weird Sea Creatures* are rich in content and appeal. Erich Hoyt is a conservationist and cetacean researcher who has authored both adult and children’s books on cetaceans, whale watching, social insects, and deep-sea life; his extensive knowledge and interest in the life of the oceans is evident throughout the book. Intended for readers 10 and up, *Weird Sea Creatures* begins with a written introduction to the deep sea, followed by photographs of 50 deep-sea organisms, including blackdevil angler fish, piglet squid, deep-sea opossum shrimp, dragonish, sea urchins, brittle stars, and many more.

Hoyt’s knowledge of and affection for his subject matter is evident throughout, starting with the author’s note in which he states that “I have come to know and sympathize with, even to love, all of the creatures in this book. Apologies are due for calling