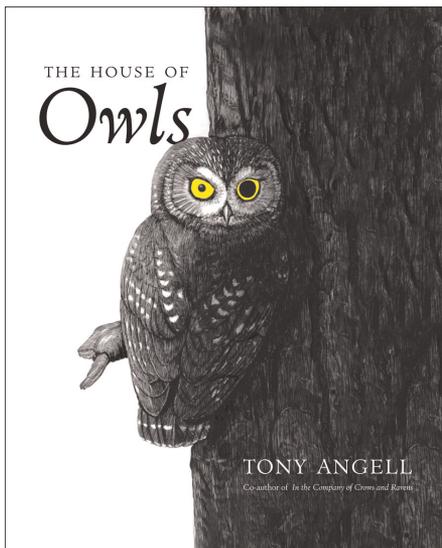


I rate this book “three frogs” because it is not a smooth read on several levels: the way the characters interact, confusion about the timeline, locations, and fictional and nonfictional characters. *The Evolutionist* is worth reading because Wallace’s personal story showcases the depth and breadth of the scientific process through Wallace’s perseverance, skill, and intellect.



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ANIMALS

The House of Owls. By Tony Angell. 2015. Yale University Press. (ISBN 0300203446). 203 pp. Hardcover. \$30.

“I dare say a flock of books on owls has been produced over the past several decades,” notes author Tony Angell in the foreword to his volume *The House of Owls*. “With good reason,” he adds: “owls are fascinating subjects.” This book is a welcome addition to the cadre: Angell approaches

owls with admiration, biological and ecological understanding, care, and familiarity. *The House of Owls* is a lovely combination of personal narrative, natural history, overview guide, and visual treasure.

The first half of the book is a presentation of the natural history of owls, divided into two sections. The author describes his firsthand experience as his family observed nesting western screech owls for a quarter of a century. Readers rejoice with the author in the success of the occupants of “The Fortress,” a homemade owl-nesting box. Over the first year, a pair of nesting screech owls, displaced from their storm-damaged nest, takes up residence in the nest box, and (as the author and his family watch) court, forage, nourish their babies, teach their owlets to hunt, and, finally, in the fall, disperse into the surrounding woods – a cycle that the author and his family then observed repeated for 25 years. “About Owls” is the author’s presentation of the evolution, adaptations, behavior, and history of owls. A consummate naturalist, Angell investigates his owls’ nesting box to learn about their diet and their effect on the local ecosystem, examines a dissected great horned owl’s flight muscles and aerodynamic fat deposits, and depicts skulls of several species showing the asymmetrical ear openings that allow owls to hunt prey they cannot even see, such as under snow cover. Behavior, diet, hunting skills, role in human history, and ecology are all presented interestingly and clearly. There is some amazing information: a pair of owls with five owlets will consume more than 3000 rodents in a single nesting season; the bare bottoms of a great gray owl’s toes allow it to sense and grip prey hidden beneath the snow, and an owl in a medieval heraldic device symbolizes the power, intelligence, and fair nature of the owner.

The second half of *The House of Owls* is essentially a field guide to the various owl species found in North America, arranged in three sections: “Owls in Company with People,” “Owls of Unique Habitat,” and “Owls of Wild and Remote Places.” Each section presents the owl, its scientific name

and characteristics, range map and habitat, food preferences, vocalizations, courtship and nesting, threats and conservation, and vital statistics. Angell’s description of the barn owl (“Owls in Company with People”) make one long to have the right old outbuilding in which an owl family can establish itself; his presentation of the spotted owl (“Owls of Unique Habitat”) helps the reader understand it as a keystone species in the old growth conifer forests of the far west. The description of each owl species is interesting and informative. Readers will find themselves listening more intently to the summer night sounds in hopes of discovering these local aerial predators.

A third charming, informative, and wonderful aspect of *The House of Owls* is the many illustrations depicting owl behavior, anatomy, and habitat that grace almost every page of the volume. Angell is a talented artist: his scratchboard and pen-and-ink illustrations are treasures, and it comes as no surprise that Angell won the prestigious Victoria and Albert illustration award in 2006; his portrayals of owls in their interactions and habitats are sensitive, thoughtful, and lovely. Angell thoroughly understands the didactic value and power of illustrations: without even looking at the text, a reader can understand owls – their habitat, habits, threats, and behavior – through examination of Angell’s lovely illustrations.

A House of Owls is one of the finest and most approachable of natural histories I have seen: charming, thoughtful, informative, and serious. Interested readers and students will find much within this modest volume, including one of the clearest verbal and visual presentations of natural history available. Angell brings owls close to the reader, allowing them to rejoice in and value a natural world that is closer, and more valuable, than they may have previously imagined.



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