ForeWord Reviews

North American Owls: Journey through a Shadowed World
Jim Burns
Willow Creek Press
978-1-57223-682-0
(March 2004)

The author's field notes from December 30, 1982 at the National Wildlife Refuge in Texas read: "full moon rising up through mist; damp, spooky; howling bobcats; SEOWs (Short-Eared Owls) like giant moths w/languorous, floppy-winged flight over spartina marshes. We've never seen multiple Short-Eareds! We've never seen a bobcat! We've never even heard a bobcat. This was a pretty good day at the office."

The "office" where Burns has been toiling, photographing birds, is America's countryside, fields, forests, and mountains-the habitats of nineteen species of North American owls. This is not the usual scientific owl book. It synthesizes the author's accounts of many owling adventures with his discoveries and reactions to the birds.

His two rules in owling are that owls "never appear when and where they are expected and that they always appear when and where they are least expected.?"

The book offers a helpful glossary in the front matter, its avian terms easily remembered to ease and speed uninterrupted reading. Each chapter-one for each species-includes facts about vocalization, size, physical features, nesting sites, habits, habitat range, etc. The chapters are short essays or poem-essays; each provides color photographs exhibiting the features or behaviors of the particular species.

Some photographs, mainly of birds in flight, are remarkably powerful. Others, such as those of the owl's wing, both from above and below, are mainly informative. Burns's voice is friendly, and his prose is specific, especially in his attempts to describe the owls' calls. Consider the "eight-shooter" (eight-syllable call) of the Barred Owl: "Hoo, Hoo, Hu, Hoooo, Hoo, Hoo, Hu, Hooooaaw!" The accompanying CD allows the reader to hear authentic recordings of the calls.

Burns has been photographing birds for more than twenty years. Widely known and appreciated in the birding world, he has been published in Birding and Birders World, and has created photo quizzes for Arizona's Special Species feature for the Cactus Wrendition, a publication of the Maricopa Audubon Society in Phoenix. In this volume, the balance between the author's brief essays and avian photography

leans towards emphasis on the photography, especially when the pictures are startling. This elevates the quality of the book and enhances the flow of art and narrative together.

This work is deeply personal to the author, who writes: “This is not a guide book to the owls. This is a guide book to my soul.” For Burns, “owls are a metaphor for the natural world and
for life itself.” While birders are the targeted readers, all nature lovers will find this book worthwhile.