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Book Review

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Owls of the Eastern Ice: A Quest to Find and Save the World's Largest Owl. By Jonathan C. Slaght. 2020. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, NY, USA. 348 pp, 16 color photographs. Hardcover. $28.00.

Jonathan Slaght's *Owls of the Eastern Ice* provides a rare insight into a part of the world few of us have been (or will be) fortunate enough to visit, and an owl species only a handful of RRF members have ever seen in the wild.

Jonathan's remarkable field account takes place in Eastern Russia and its Sikhote-Alin mountain range, more specifically the Province of Primorye, where Russia, China and North Korea are connected through a chain of rugged, conifer and coniferous-deciduous forested mountain ranges. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2001, Primorye is a remote, wild, and logistically challenging area to access. Jonathan first visited this region as a 19-year-old travelling with his dad, and has been fascinated with this part of the world ever since, finding reasons to return for both the US Peace Corps and his Ph.D. research. As a Peace Corps volunteer, he learned the language, made connections, and immersed himself in the culture, which ultimately prepared him for what he embarked on next: taking on the very challenging Ph.D. research topic of understanding the foraging behavior of the understudied, rare, and elusive Blakiston's Fish Owl (*Bubo blakistoni*; IUCN Red List-rare and endangered).

As with any Ph.D. project, you start with a to-do list, and in some ways Jonathan's to-do list sounded very similar to that of other Ph.D. and research projects: acquire funding, plan field seasons, find Blakiston's Fish Owls, trap and affix transmitters to fish owls, analyze data, identify key habitats for the owls, develop a conservation plan to protect Blakiston's Fish Owls and their habitats. "*How hard could it be?*", Jonathan writes as the final sentence in the introductory chapter. This is of course a statement many of us can relate to going into our first major research project and not knowing what difficulties or uncertainties lie ahead.

This fascinating and well written book depicts Jonathan's journey over several years conducting research on one of the largest owls in the world, the Blakiston's Fish Owl, in Primorye, which is considered to be this owls' last global stronghold. As the name implies, this is not your typical rodent-eating owl; it is very unusual, as it specializes on eating fish and is adapted to hunting in riparian habitat (e.g., mountainous rivers and streams), primarily for fish but also other aquatic creatures.

The beginning of the book reads a bit like a Cold War John Le Carré novel as Jonathan waits patiently for a winter storm to pass so that he can finally make it to the village Agzu on an overcrowded commercial helicopter to begin his field work. There he meets his field crew, and his key Russian collaborator, Sergey Avdeyuk, a seasoned field biologist with extensive experience searching for fish owls. Jonathan writes of his interactions with local villagers, depicting their generosity, but also their sometimes-tragic love of vodka. Primorye as a province relies on resource extraction (logging and mining), fishing, and hunting. Being far removed from the governing centers of Russia, Primorye inhabitants are self-reliant and do things their own way. This can, as Jonathan describes, have a detrimental effect, such as when inhabitants take advantage of vulnerable wildlife during extreme snow conditions and hunt apex predators, due to a misguided conception that Siberian tigers *(Panthera tigris altaica*) compete with them for food. He writes of locals overfishing salmon and/or indiscriminately shooting wildlife, including Blakiston's Fish Owls. In spite of this and the harsh winter weather, Jonathan describes his wilderness study area and a landscape that is magnificent and beautiful in its own right.

To find fish owls in the Samarga River Basin, one must travel by snowmobile on the frozen rivers. This is done in February, at the beginning of the breeding season when the owls are most vocal. Slaght's research crew's travels are nerve-racking as the quiet frozen rivers turn into feisty icy waterways during the yearly spring thaw.

Finding fish owls and identifying territories was primarily groundwork for the next and most challenging aspect of Jonathan's research, learning how to trap fish owls. There was no blueprint for how to attract, catch, and radio-tag Blakiston's Fish Owl, which makes for an interesting read for raptor researchers. We read how Jonathan connects with leading raptor experts to brainstorm on how to trap this elusive owl in extreme cold weather conditions, along riparian corridors, at night. Jonathan colorfully describes the emotional ups and downs many RRF members and other ornithologists have experienced when embarking on a new research project on a big, unknown, endangered bird. As owl researchers, we (SH and RAM) were aware that, to our knowledge, Jonathan and his team were the first to successfully trap, harness with telemetry gear, and follow this species—a momentous accomplishment on its own merit (see also Slaght et al. 2009). We learn about his team's increasing success and skill in trapping and processing Blakiston's Fish Owls, using their one-of-a-kind research truck or near their remote forest cabin, all of

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which provides a vivid and heartening armchair experience for raptorphiles. Jonathan is refreshingly candid about his research failures and fatigue, and you start to cheer for him and the rest of his team when they are successful at catching Blakiston's Fish Owls.

Jonathan does not neglect to recognize his unique situation trying to find and trap an elusive owl in a region where research on birds is seen almost as a frivolous novelty. "*It had been arrogant of me to think we could stroll up to some of the least studied birds in Northeast Asia and assume they'd hand us their secrets*" (Slaght 2020; p. 183).

Jonathan does an excellent job weaving his research and larger cultural aspects together, often with a good dose of humor from both experiences. He encounters some very interesting human characters along the way such as Anatoliy, the rather colorful and friendly hermit who hosts the research team in his cabin for extended periods during their winter field seasons. The unique situation of living cramped together 24/7 with fellow researchers during the winter months can, perhaps, in the moment be frustrating, but in hindsight provides for a humorous and relatable story, shedding light on the less glamorous aspects of raptor field work.

Slaght's connection with the local community and collaboration with an extremely seasoned and gifted team of Russian field biologists allows the story to come full circle, when the results from the telemetry work are incorporated into management recommendations for local logging companies. Fortunately, this is a situation where there is potential for a win-win, as the recommended minor changes in forestry practice come at a small cost to logging companies, and a great benefit to the owls and other wildlife.

We found this book was a substantive balance between technical research on a virtually unknown species, wildlife and landscape observations within a rarely visited area, and an honest and introspective analysis of human interaction in a unique culture. As such, this book is an excellent read for new and old owl biologists, other curious raptor researchers, and nonscientists who may want a unique literary diversion. Even if you have read Jonathan's many peer-reviewed papers on Blakiston's Fish Owl ecology and conservation (e.g., Slaght and Surmach 2008, Slaght et al. 2018), we highly recommend this book to RRF members and those who love raptors.

There is something comforting about Jonathan's book, as Primorye is one of the few remaining parts of the world where there is limited separation between humans and the resources that our species depends on for survival. Although Jonathan is very honest in depicting overexploitation of natural resources—a common global lament—he also shows us through his well-crafted prose that Primorye is still a wild region with a certain amount of resilience to anthropogenic disturbance. Jonathan concludes with hard-earned wisdom gained while working on the Blakiston's Fish Owl: "*with proper management, we'll always see fish in the rivers here, and we'll continue to follow tracks of tigers that weave among pine and shadow in search of prey*" (Slaght 2020; p. 310).

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