

The House of Owls

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BOOK REVIEW

The House of Owls

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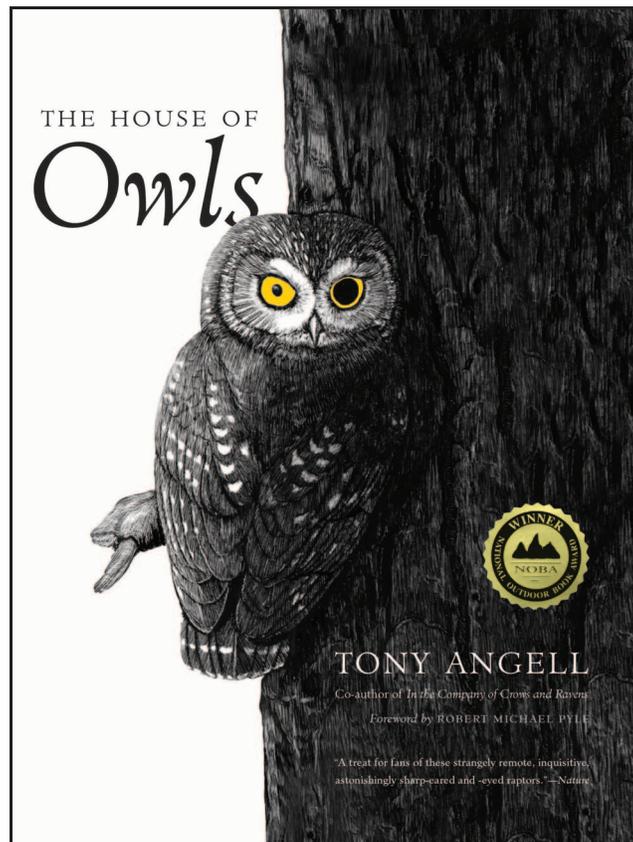
The House of Owls by Tony Angell. 2015. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, USA. 193 pp., 75 illustrations. \$30 (hardcover). ISBN 978-0-300-20344-8.

Observation is a vital function of both scientist and artist. Good natural-history writing is predicated on the successful union of art and science. *The House of Owls* is a collection of personal narrative, illustration, and natural history of the owls of the United States and Canada from lifelong observer Tony Angell. Although this book contains a broad gamut of topics related to owls and strives to provide a comprehensive resource for the owl enthusiast, its explicit focus is toward the artist and naturalist, rather than those in pursuit of traditional scientific knowledge.

Following an Introduction by Robert Michael Pyle and a Preface by the author, Chapter 1, also titled “The House of Owls,” is an essay-like personal narrative of the first year in which Western Screech Owls took residence in a nest box in Angell’s backyard. The chapter is punctuated with subsections covering each month of that year. The chapter reads like a refined field journal and offers a unique and personal view both of Angell himself and of the owls. Chapter 2, “About Owls,” delves into the more distinguishable evolutionary adaptations and behaviors of owls, including those

associated with silent flight, hearing, vision, camouflage, nest selection, feather function, migration, pair bonding, and diet, among others. Chapter 3, “Owls & Human Culture,” probes the owl’s long and storied place in human history.

Angell provides many examples of the ways we have used owls as icons throughout much of our recent history and argues for the importance of our emotional relationship with owls and the rest of the natural world. The remaining three chapters collectively represent species accounts for the 19 species that breed in the United States and Canada, unconventionally grouped by “where they can be found”: “Owls and People” (Chapter 4), “Owls of Unique Habitat” (Chapter 5), and “Owls of Remote and Wild Places” (Chapter 6). Angell introduces each species with a short personal narrative of his experience, followed by six subsections: Range and Habitat, Food Preferences, Vocalizations, Courtship and Nesting, Threats and Conservation,



and Vital Statistics.

Several things separate *The House of Owls* from other owl-related texts. The first, and perhaps the most obvious, is the author’s voice. Angell’s perspective of the world is unique, and his narrative and personal knowledge are inherently distinct. *The House of Owls* is more than a

summary and interpretation of what is known from the literature. It is the exposition of Angell's emotional connection to owls and to the natural world, based on his lifelong pursuit to observe and know them. No point illuminates this better than Angell's illustrations, which grace nearly every page and are a highlight of the book. One cursory look at any of his portrayals is sufficient to sense the prodigious depth to which Angell has studied and observed his subject. The opportunity for closer admiration of his mastery is well worth the price. More importantly, his depictions bolster and illuminate the book, distinguishing *The House of Owls* from similar publications.

One disappointment is the lack of references throughout the text and the general lack of primary literature in the bibliography. Angell states explicitly that the book is directed toward naturalists and artists more than scientists, and the absence of citations certainly makes the text more reader-friendly. For example, I can see that the field-note, narrative style of Chapter 1 should not be impregnated with clunky citations; yet the lack of citations is regrettable, particularly in Chapters 2 and 3. No doubt Angell has a lifetime of observation and education to buoy the discussions in those chapters, but he is certainly interpreting results from many other sources as well, and it is impossible to distinguish these. It would be simple and not overly obtrusive to include a superscripted number referencing the appropriate publication in the bibliography. Often I wanted to review the source of a specific statement or topic but was unable to. For example, while I am familiar with studies that demonstrate the importance of the owl's facial disk in gathering and focusing sound (e.g., Knudsen and Konishi 1979), which isn't discussed in this book, I am unfamiliar with Angell's description of its ability to gather and focus light on the retina to "better resolve images under low-light conditions." The lack of references prevented me from investigating this and its adaptive significance further.

In the same vein, the other criticism I have is about the subjective nature of many statements that are offered as fact, after an otherwise good description. One example is Angell's statement that "An incident like this would impress the smaller birds, and they would remember it as a place to avoid," which follows an effective description of mobbing behavior by passerines toward owls. While it is possible that young songbirds would avoid the area, it is also entirely possible that they would again join in the

mobbing—I know of no data (or a reference) to suggest an answer one way or the other. My personal preference is to err on the conservative side when trying to expound upon the motives behind any animal behavior.

Lastly, while we do know a lot about owls, there are still many things we understand poorly or not at all. Alternative hypotheses explaining certain behaviors, or an acknowledgment that we don't know why owls behave or look as they do, would be welcome additions to the book. For example, Angell writes that "The habit of caching prey about the nest is not a trait that is likely to be passed on" between generations because it would attract predators. Perhaps, but it is at least equally plausible that owls that cache more prey about nests ultimately raise more chicks to fledging (Korpimäki 1989). Prey caching at the nest may very well be a trait that is passed on. Only if we followed the prey-caching traits of parents and their young over several generations would we be able to suggest the persistence of the behavior. But the truth is that we currently don't know.

Owls hold a distinct position in our collective psyche. As compelling and enigmatic as they are, they provoke a plethora of emotions, evidenced by the scores of books dedicated to their lives. *The House of Owls* emphasizes not only what it must be like to be an owl, but also what it means to live close to them and what it feels like to be a guest in their world. It is distinguished by the presence of Angell's voice and narrative throughout, weaving biology and natural history into personal experience, observation, and art—and Angell is quite successful in this endeavor. *The House of Owls* may not be my first recommendation to those interested in a single book on the subject or those inclined toward the scientific study of owls, but it will surely find a home on the shelves of naturalists, enthusiasts, admirers of art, and those who find company in the world all around them.

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