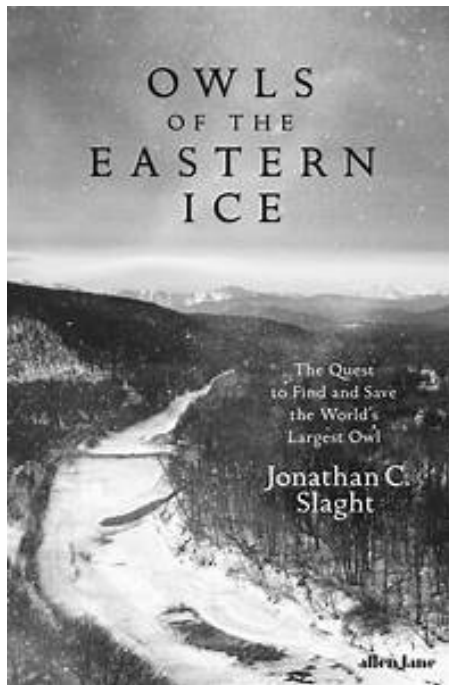


## Book Review: Owls of the Eastern Ice: A quest to find and save the world's largest owl

JoAnn Hackos. January 31, 2021 :

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by Jonathan C. Slaght



The Eastern Ice – the name refers to the Primorye Province of eastern Russia, part of the Kamchatka Peninsula north (far north) of Vladivostok. When Bill and I visited a few years ago on our trip to the Aleutian Islands, we ventured just north of Vladivostok – and were warned about grizzly bears on the trail we were walking to see birds and wildflowers. They also have Amur Tigers, which we didn't know at the time.

The Primorye Province is the setting for Jonathan Slaght's story of his Ph.D. research to understand the habitat and habits of the Blakiston's Fish Owl. The Fish Owl is huge, about the size of an eagle. Slaght describes it as "fluffier and more portly, with enormous ear tufts." *Owls of the Eastern Ice* is the story of Slaght's multi-year work to find where the Fish Owls lived, how they hunted for prey, how they raised their young, and how they could be helped to survive.

Larry White, Evergreen Audubon Board member, recommended this book as one of his favorites. He comments:

I related to what is required for a wildlife biologist to undertake a successful study of a rare species in a remote area under harsh conditions: Patience, perseverance, ingenuity,

resourcefulness, mental and physical toughness, and a genuine love of the resource.

Jonathan writes in a style that brings the reader along with him and expresses both the joys and frustrations of such an endeavor.”



Fish Owl

It turns out that Fish Owls, as you might expect, catch and eat fish, especially salmon, that they catch in the fast-moving streams of the Primorye Province. Slaght’s goal is to find out where and how they hunt, where they nest, and how they move about their territories through the year. To find them requires tracking them through the freezing cold and snowy winter when their tracks are visible in the snow, females are on the nest, and their low-pitched sounds echo through what is virtual wilderness.

The researchers stay in everything from huts, non-winterized tents, and an occasional dacha owned by a semi-oligarch. Many of the huts are incredibly filthy and have no indoor toilets. Often the huts are also occupied by heavy vodka drinkers. Apparently, the custom is to empty an open vodka bottle, no matter what. Food is often hard to come by, gasoline even more so.

I especially enjoyed reading about the adventures that Slaght and his colleagues endured through the frigid winters. The cast of characters that he works with and meets is as fascinating as the owls themselves. The team travels by skis, snowmobiles, sleds and lumbering all-terrain vehicles that often break down. However, those vehicles help them get across rivers in flood, especially when a make-shift air intake is above the water level.

Slaght and his colleagues are especially fond of Anatoliy, who lives alone in a cabin far from the roads. Anatoliy has lived alone in the woods for many years, constructing his cabin from parts of an abandoned hydroelectric station from the Second World War. But he is warm and friendly and offers the team a place to stay while looking for owls. He claims that gnomes tickle his feet at night and is convinced that spirits live on the top of the closest mountain. As luck and spirits would have it, near Anatoliy’s cabin, they manage to capture their first Fish Owl.

Perhaps my favorite character is Andrey Katkov, who snores so loudly that no one will stay in the same room with him. We learn that Katkov “likes to keep those within earshot in a heightened state of agitation with an astonishing range of pops, whistles, shrieks, and groans.” But Katkov proves a loyal and effective team member. Together they capture, band, and attach and recover transmitters from a good selection of Fish

Owls, enabling Slaughter to track their movements and understand what areas require preservation for the owls to thrive.

*Owls of the Eastern Ice* is a great introduction to the day-to-day hard work that is required for ornithological field research. It also is a wonderful source of insight into the “outback” of easternmost Russia and all the characters that try to make a living in an extraordinarily rough land.