

Owls of the Eastern Ice by Jonathan Slaght: A Compelling Tale of Conservation and International Friendship
By: Annika Salmi

It has fierce yellow eyes, and lives in the trunks of massive, old-growth trees. When the bird takes flight, it can have a wingspan of over six feet. In breeding season, the owls' call is so in sync that novices often believe only one bird is hooting. Blakiston's fish owl is the largest living species of owl, living in parts of Japan, China, and far east Russia. They're difficult to find, especially as loggers destroy their habitat year over year.

Jonathan Slaght has spent his career researching this majestic creature and fighting to conserve its habitat. In "Owls of the Eastern Ice," Jonathan Slaght narrates his fieldwork in Primorye, east Russia, searching for the owl. The result is an engaging read of adventures through snow and ice. Beyond the story, Slaght also reveals the work behind both conserving habitats and cross cultural science.

The book's events take place over a period of four years, beginning with the start of his PhD project. The owls are easiest to find in the winter, so every season he leaves Minnesota for Russia. The book follows his extensive quest through the snowy wilderness to find, trap, and then tag the fish owls. His goal is to use the GPS information to decipher the owl's preferred habitat and determine what areas to protect.

Finding and trapping is a convoluted process; the birds are rare, and avoid many traps Slaght's team devises. Eastern Russia is harsh and unforgiving. Slaght recounts being wet to the bone, trudging through snow for hours, sleeping in unforgiving conditions, and even a dramatic sequence of events where he sits in a tractor being ridden over a roaring, overflowing river.

Another challenge Slaght faces is the difficulty of doing field research in a foreign land. While Slaght is fluent in Russian, Primorye sees few visitors and many are shocked to learn he's American and studying owls, no less. He talks seriously of lasting Cold War difficulties, and counters that wildlife sees no borders. His Russian coworkers seem outlandish to an American reader. Sergey, his most frequent assistant, has "an upper row of gold teeth perpetually clenching a cigarette." Slaght talks about how his colleagues make fun of him often, for not knowing how to hold his vodka, failing to drive a snowmobile correctly, wearing fancy outdoor gear, and more. Despite this, he's evidently fond of all of them. Through his descriptions of their friendships, Slaght makes a strong argument that science knows no borders. After all, wildlife doesn't; salmon that the fish owls hunt are eaten all over Asia, and wood from Primorye forests goes to North America.

Despite the difficulties he faces, Slaght's passion for his job leaks out of every sentence. Even as Slaght campaigns for conservation and international collaboration, "Owls of the Eastern Ice" is ultimately about loving fieldwork. On returning to Primorye one year, he writes "I was truly comfortable here, alone among the trees, breathing in the cold air and passing familiar landmarks."

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