



Excerpt from the Preface of *What an Owl Knows*

What is it about owls that so entralls us? They appear in the Chauvet Cave paintings of France dating to 30,000 years ago and in the hieroglyphics of ancient Egyptians, in Greek mythology and among the deities of the Ainu people of Japan, in the prints and etchings of Picasso and as couriers in the Harry Potter stories, shuttling between the realm of matter-of-fact Muggles and the magical. They inhabit our languages and are embedded in our sayings. When we're cranky, stubborn, uncooperative, we are "owly." If we stay up late or are active at night, we're "night owls." If we're aged and sage, we're "wise old owls."

In some places, owls vie with penguins for popularity. In others, they're vilified as demon spirits. Owls have this kind of duality. They're tender and deadly, cute and brutal, ferocious and funny, sometimes even playing the mischievous clown, stealing camera equipment or snatching hats. We see something deeply familiar in them, with their round heads and big eyes, and at the same time, an intimation of a whole other kind of existence, the dark side of the one we inhabit. Most owls are nocturnal creatures that move about unseen, revealed only by their weird night hoots and cries. Their flight is velvety quiet, and their hunting skills, often deployed in pitch black, inspire awe.

In many cultures, owls are deemed half bird, half spirit, crossovers between the real and the ethereal, considered by turns symbols of knowledge and wisdom on the one hand, and bearers of bad luck and illness, even death, on the other. They're often viewed as prophets or messengers. The Greeks believed that an owl flying over a battlefield predicted victory. In the early folklore of India, owls crop up as symbols of wisdom and prophecy. So, too,

among the Navajo. The Navajo myth of Nayenezgani, the creator, reminds people that they must listen to the voice of the prophet owl if they want to know their future. The Aztecs considered owls a symbol of the underworld, and the Maya, as messengers of Xibalba, the "place of fright." In *Julius Caesar*, Casca is terrified when an owl appears by day as an omen of imminent death: "The bird of night did sit, / Even at noonday upon the marketplace, / Hooting and shrieking."



Soga Nichiokuan, *Owl on a Pine Branch* (detail), early 17th century, hanging scroll, ink on paper, 45 3/16 × 20 3/16 in (114.8 × 51.2 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Fishbein-Bender Collection; Gift of T. Richard Fishbein and Estelle P. Bender, 2012 (2012.522.1).



[...]

This book explores what new science has discovered about these enigmatic birds—their remarkable anatomy, biology, and behavior and the hunting skills, stealth, and sensory prowess that distinguish them from nearly all other birds. It looks at how researchers have pulled back the curtain on how owls communicate, court, and mate, how they raise their young, whether they act more from instinct or from learning, why they move from place to place or stay put to weather the seasons, and what they have to tell us about their nature—and our own. It explores new insights gleaned from studying owls in the wild and also in captivity, birds kept “in the hand,” most often because they’ve been injured. Specialists who live and work with owls in intimate partner relationships are learning things one can learn only up close, one on one with an owl. They’re advancing the science of caring for these birds, and in return, the owls they heal are helping to educate the public and revealing some of the deepest mysteries about their communication, their individuality and personality, their emotions and intelligence.

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