



THE OWL  
AND THE  
WOODPECKER

Encounters with North  
America's Most Iconic Birds

P A U L B A N N I C K

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AUDIO RECORDINGS BY MARTYN STEWART



# Contents

*Foreword* 9  
*Introduction* 11  
*Acknowledgments* 16  
*Map* 17

**1** : **PACIFIC COAST URBAN AND SUBURBAN HABITATS** 19

**2** : **NORTHWESTERN MARITIME FORESTS** 29

**3** : **WESTERN DRY MOUNTAIN FORESTS** 39

**4** : **WESTERN OAK WOODLANDS** 71

**5** : **GRASSLANDS AND SHRUB-STEPPE** 83

**6** : **SOUTHWESTERN DRY LANDS** 105

**7** : **SOUTHEASTERN PINE FORESTS** 123

**8** : **EASTERN SUBURBAN AND URBAN HABITATS** 133

**9** : **NORTHEASTERN FORESTS** 143

**10** : **BOREAL FOREST** 153

**11** : **ARCTIC TUNDRA** 177

*Field Guide to North American Owl and Woodpecker Species* 186  
*Bibliography* 195  
*A Note About the Photography* 197  
*About the Author* 197  
*Index* 198

*Opposite: An Acorn Woodpecker retrieves an acorn from a nest cavity before fitting it into one of the vacant holes in a granary.*



## Foreword

Nature has always defined human character and directed our purposes. Among our first civilized efforts were creative expressions, using the materials at hand, that recorded our responses to the great mammals and birds we shared the world with. For thousands of generations we mythically celebrated their form, strength, and spirit as paintings on the walls of caves and in carvings of bone and stone. It wasn't, however, until five hundred years ago that we began to look more objectively at what we observed around us. Ships exploring new worlds then started including artists as part of their crews. With varying skill they sketched some of the exotic flora and fauna encountered. These early efforts initiated a process whereby information combined with aesthetics to expand understanding and to clarify what was newly discovered. This legacy of interpretation and celebration of nature continues to this day.

A hundred and fifty years ago, photography began to influence our perception of the world, but it wasn't until the beginning of the twentieth century that an earnest attempt was made to record North America's natural heritage. By that time the age of the great natural history illustrators was passing and photographers were lugging their ponderous box cameras into alpine meadows, deep forests, swamps, and canyons to photograph the wildlife residing there. Most of the resulting pictures showed distant and undistinguished subjects. Over the past half century, however, technology has made a vast difference in how we see the world. Telephoto lenses, remote triggers, fast film, and digital systems, to name a few innovations, allow the photographer to enter into the life of the wild as never before, at a level far more intimate than can be achieved with the naked eye. Fascinating and instructive as this access can be, it can distract

us sometimes with its detail and scale from the more important and subtle stories to be told. Rather than seeing the fullness of an animal's habitat—its behavior, and its relationship to the community around it—we are left only with detailed impressions of feathers and fur.

With this in mind it is refreshing to come upon the work of Paul Bannick. The photographer/naturalist has not simply produced another book with exceptional photographs of birds; he has advanced the entire field of nature study by revealing the remarkable relationships that exist between woodpeckers and other species, particularly owls. Through Bannick's lenses and his thoughtful compositions, the larger world of nature comes into view as his subjects go about the business of home building, grooming, courtship, raising families, squabbling with competitors, or intently searching out their next meal. Such intimacy with nature produces profound empathy for these species and can only have been achieved by what the photographer refers to as his "inch by inch" movement into the lives of his subjects.

With patience, persistence, and a singular respect for his subject, Paul Bannick has produced a work that will endure. While it will certainly remain a constant reference to what is attractive and compelling in the behavior and appearance of birds, it will also continue to provide an example of how the fabric of nature is so carefully and intricately composed and what we might find there if we are willing to look long and deeply enough. These truthful and breathtaking images in company with informative narrative strengthen our footing for forays to the field where we can partake of the infinite wisdom that awaits us there.

—Tony Angell

*Opposite: A female Northern Pygmy-Owl pops up from the depths of her cavity to trade calls with her mate outside.*



## Eastern Suburban and Urban Habitats

Suburban and urban habitats in the East, like those in the West, serve as potential extensions or connections to surrounding native habitat. For owls and woodpeckers, the most important elements include properly located nesting places in the form of snags or nest boxes, species-specific food sources such as native plants and seeds, and a water source. Much of the best habitat exists, predictably, in large parks. With proper habitat, suburban and even some urban areas of eastern North America can host several interesting woodpeckers and owls, including the most important excavator in North America and the most colorful owl.

I was observing a **Yellow-shafted Flicker** cavity in the late spring in North Carolina. Two timid soft brown heads peered from the cavity as their parents cried *kwikwikwiki* from a nearby tree in an attempt to lure the youngsters from the nest. Black mustaches identified both chicks as males. This appeared to be a small brood for this species. The parents flew to the nest tree as if to feed, then quickly departed and belted out another call from a distant tree. With a sudden burst of courage, one of the chicks gripped the lip of the cavity with its claws, thrust its head and breast out, and trustingly leapt from the cavity, its untested wings carrying it on a smooth, direct course to the waiting parents. Before I could back up and allow my fixed lens to capture the second fledgling, the more reluctant chick fol-

lowed the identical course. To my surprise, a third chick popped into the spot occupied by its predecessor, and after it fledged, a fourth bounced up and out of the cavity. This cavity appeared to be dispensing new Yellow-shafted Flickers like a Pez dispenser.

Yellow-shafted Flickers are the eastern subspecies of the Northern Flicker and can be distinguished from their western relatives by their black mustache, red nape crescent, and yellow feathers underneath their wings and tails. Being large and brown, they are unlikely to be confused with any other eastern or midwestern woodpecker; the undulating flight and distinctive white rump patch set apart all Northern Flickers from other woodpeckers while in flight.

The territorial displays of this common woodpecker often lend a golden edge to spring in midwestern and eastern North America. The yellow feathers under the wings and tail are not used to attract a mate but to display to birds of the same sex that infringe upon the territory of a mated pair. Often the mate will stand apart and watch the furious flagging and waving tail feathers of such encounters. Both sexes aggressively defend nesting territories against incursions from other flickers, although the size of the defended turf shrinks once incubation begins. These flickers seem unconcerned about the presence of other species, which sometimes nest in the same trees.

*Opposite: A Yellow-shafted Northern Flicker is startled to find his mate poking her head from their cavity just as he arrives.*

*Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl chicks await their return to the nest box after being banded and weighed as part of a long-term research project.*





## Field Guide to North American Owl and Woodpecker Species



**BARN OWL** (*Tyto alba*)

**Description:** A medium-size buff-colored owl with a heart-shaped facial disk, approximately 16 inches long with a wingspan of 42 inches.

**Similar Species:** Unlikely to be confused with any other North American owl except in flight, when due to its light coloration one might mistake it for the larger and whiter Snowy Owl.

**Interesting Fact:** World's most widespread owl, and the one most adapted to living alongside humans.

**North American Distribution and Habitat:** Found in a wide variety of rural, urban, and suburban habitats throughout most states, barely reaching Canada in southwestern British Columbia.

**Nesting:** February until late November, nests in a variety of cavities including cliff banks, haystacks, barns, church steeples, nest boxes, and such. Lays 2 to 18 eggs, sometimes 2 or even 3 clutches in a season.

**Vocalization:** Most common call is a drawn out hissing scream, *ssssshhh*.



**SHORT-EARED OWL** (*Asio flammeus*)

**Description:** A medium-size, long-winged, diurnal owl, approximately 15 inches long with a wingspan of 38 inches.

**Similar Species:** At rest, with or without small ear tufts displayed, it is distinctive, but in flight it can be confused with the darker Long-eared Owl that hunts at night.

**Interesting Fact:** Like the Long-eared Owl, known for "wing-clap" displays during courtship.

**North American Distribution and Habitat:** Breeds in open landscapes throughout much of the Arctic; boreal, interior West; Great Plains; and parts of California. Winters west, south, and east of these areas.

**Nesting:** Mid-March through late June, in a bowl scraped out of the ground by the female and lined with grasses. Lays 1 to 11 eggs.

**Vocalization:** Silent except during mating season, when a soft *voo-poo-poo-poo* is uttered over a few seconds.



**GOLDEN-FRONTED WOODPECKER** (*Melanerpes aurifrons*)

**Description:** A medium-size zebra-backed woodpecker, approximately 9.5 inches long with a wingspan of 17 inches.

**Similar Species:** Looks very similar and is closely related to both the Gila Woodpecker and the Red-bellied Woodpecker. Male features a red crown. Both sexes sport a yellowish nape.

**Interesting Fact:** One of two woodpeckers in North America that is expanding its range.

**North American Distribution and Habitat:** Breeds in arid brushlands and semi-open woodlands from southern Texas north into southwestern Oklahoma.

**Nesting:** Mid-March through July. Often reuses cavities. Lays 4 to 7 eggs. Second broods are common.

**Vocalization:** A loud, harsh *krrrr* that lasts less than half a second. During breeding season, 1 to 4 taps are followed by a series of rolling drums.



**RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER** (*Melanerpes carolinus*)

**Description:** A medium-size zebra-backed woodpecker, approximately 9.25 inches long with a wingspan of 16 inches.

**Similar Species:** Looks very similar and is closely related to both the Gila Woodpecker and the Golden-fronted Woodpecker. Both sexes feature a red nape; males also possess a red cap.

**Interesting Fact:** Extremely omnivorous, eating a wide variety of foods, including lizards and even frogs. Is expanding its range at a faster rate than any other woodpecker.

**North American Distribution and Habitat:** Breeds in a wide range of habitats throughout most of the eastern United States, where it is the most common woodpecker throughout much of the southern part of its range.

**Nesting:** Mid-April through mid-September. Red-bellied Woodpeckers commonly return to the same snag or dead limb to excavate a new cavity. Lays 3 to 6 eggs. Typically breeds once but may raise two or even three broods in southern part of its range.

**Vocalization:** A nearly half-second-long *kwirrr*.

*Opposite: A male Gila Woodpecker feeds upon nectar of the saguaro's flowers.*

# THE OWL AND THE WOODPECKER

Every wild place and urban area in North America hosts an owl or a woodpecker species, while healthy natural places often boast representatives of both. The diversity of these two families of birds, and the ways in which they define and enrich the ecosystems they inhabit, are the subjects of this vivid new book by photographer and naturalist Paul Bannick. He showcases all forty-one species of owls and woodpeckers, across eleven key habitats. And by revealing the impact of two of our most iconic birds, Bannick has created a unique approach to birding and conservation. *The Owl and the Woodpecker* is an intimate

blend of personal field notes, rich natural history, and stunning photographs.

Naturalist and award-winning photographer **Paul Bannick** specializes in natural history imagery. His work has appeared in numerous books and magazines and on interpretive signs in state and national parks throughout the West. Paul's photos also are featured regularly as part of NPR's phenomenally popular "Bird-Note" program. He is the director of development for Conservation Northwest, and lives in Seattle, Washington.

## PROMOTION

- ◆ National print and online publicity in birding, nature, and conservation magazines
- ◆ 10-city author tour
- ◆ Appearances and book signings at regional bird festivals
- ◆ BookSense postcard mailing

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