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NWLIFE

Two of our region's signature bird species are smartly discussed and beautifully captured in a new photography book

OWLS & WOODPECKERS



PAUL BANNICK

During the winter, the Great Gray Owl travels in search of food, sometimes showing up in pastures and other rural landscapes.

BY MARY ANN GWINN
Seattle Times book editor

Paul Bannick grew up in Bellevue in the days when you could step out of your suburban back yard and into a forest, wetland or stream.

As the 11th in a family of 13 kids, Bannick, a young naturalist in the making, craved the solitude the wild had to offer. "The first time I saw a snowy owl, it was right on top of the telephone pole in the back of my house," the author/photographer remembers. "That was in the 1970s, and I didn't see another one until 2005."

Bannick's tramps through the Eastside woods stoked a passion for the natural world that has achieved its apotheosis in his splendid new photography book, "The Owl and the Woodpecker: Encounters with North America's Most Iconic Birds" foreword by Tony Angell, audio birdcall recordings by Martyn Stewart (Mountaineers, 198 pp., \$24.95). It's a breathtaking collection of images of two of the Northwest's signature bird species, and it's sure to wind up on the gift lists of Seattle's legions of bird lovers and beyond — according to a 2001 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service report, Washington

state ranked fourth in the nation in numbers of birdwatchers per capita. More than a third (36 percent) of all state residents said they watched birds.

"The Owl and the Woodpecker" is not just a photo book — Bannick's text explains how birds on the owl and woodpecker family tree have adapted to challenging habitats, ranging from the American southwest to the Canadian arctic. Bannick, who left a career in the software industry to concentrate on photography and the conservation movement,

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recently answered some questions about owls, woodpeckers, and how his search for them turned into a photographic holy grail:

Q: Did you have a passion for birds and photography as a kid?

A: My father, William Bannick, started many of the East Side sports leagues; I loved sports, but in a large family, you need to get away. My earliest memories as a kid have to do with critters — every memory of myself as a kid is of finding a new animal.

With 13 kids, we didn't have a lot of money, but my father had camera equipment (William Bannick worked in public relations for Boeing). He wasn't a great career coach, but he emphasized the power of communication. I made books (both written and illustrated) about different animals, but eventually I realized I wasn't a good enough illustrator to be able to show the difference between species. With my sister's camera, I remember that I photographed a long-tailed salamander — I photographed it from eye level. Its big eyes, its long grin.

Q: How did you come up with the idea for "The Owl and the Woodpecker"?

A: I was fascinated by families of animals with multiple members. Some bird families (thrushes, hummingbirds) have just a few members, but there are 19 species of owls and 22 of woodpeckers in North America. I was originally looking just at the Pacific Northwest; the (species of owls and woodpeckers here) diverged because they were able to take advantage of all the regions' unique habitats. I found that in every new habitat I went to, there was a different woodpecker and owl. The Mountaineers liked the idea, but they wanted the book to cover North America, so I spent weekends and vacations photographing all the other owls and woodpeckers.

Q: You write that the woodpecker is a keystone species. What does that mean?

A: A keystone species is one that, relative to its abundance, has a disproportionate influence on its habitat to the benefit of other species.

Woodpeckers help with the decomposition and regeneration of forests (woodpeckers' relentless tree-drilling helps trees decompose; bugs and salamanders like to burrow in woodpecker-generated woodpiles.) Many mammals that



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

live in tree cavities, as well as half the owl species, live in cavity holes created by woodpeckers. Also, woodpeckers create sapwells that lure hummingbirds and insects. Other birds follow woodpeckers around and do cleanup.

Q: I'm fascinated with owls, but because they're nocturnal, I've never seen one in the wild. How do you find them?

A: I asked a friend who owns a natural-history bookstore — how do you find an owl? He said, "You don't find owls; they find you." The key is learning their habitat and life histories, where and how they hunt, what their fear cues are (so as not to scare them). The number one rule of photography has to be, if you change the behavior of the animals, you're not pho-

tographing it right.

Q: How has digital photography changed what you do?

A: With digital, there's no reason to stop experimenting. You're not burning up film. But you have to go through more images. You spend a lot more time at the computer.

Q: Where are some good places in Seattle to see birds, and how do you encourage them to come to your yard?

A: All the city parks — Discovery Park, Seward Park, Lincoln Park. Anywhere where salt and freshwater meet are good

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A nimble female ladder-backed woodpecker drinks the nectar of an ocotillo.



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

for birds. And anywhere there are snags. In your yard — keep snags, keep native plants. Animals have to move between environments. As much as possible, provide them with those way stations.

Q: What's your favorite owl or woodpecker?

A: The Northern hawk owl (on the cover of the book) — I really love the diurnal (active in the daytime, rather than the night) owls. The northern hawk owl can spot its prey from a half mile away. Its behavior is not fully understood — a lot of birds have breeding areas, summering areas and wintering areas, but the northern hawk owl is nomadic. It doesn't return to a particular place.

I had a wonderful encounter with northern hawk owls — I thought they were only in the northern boreal forests of Alaska and Canada. I was looking in Glacier National Park for three-toed and black-backed woodpeckers. I was driving along when heard its call. I stopped the car, threw on pounds of equipment and found them — I spent several days with them, watching them feed their young.