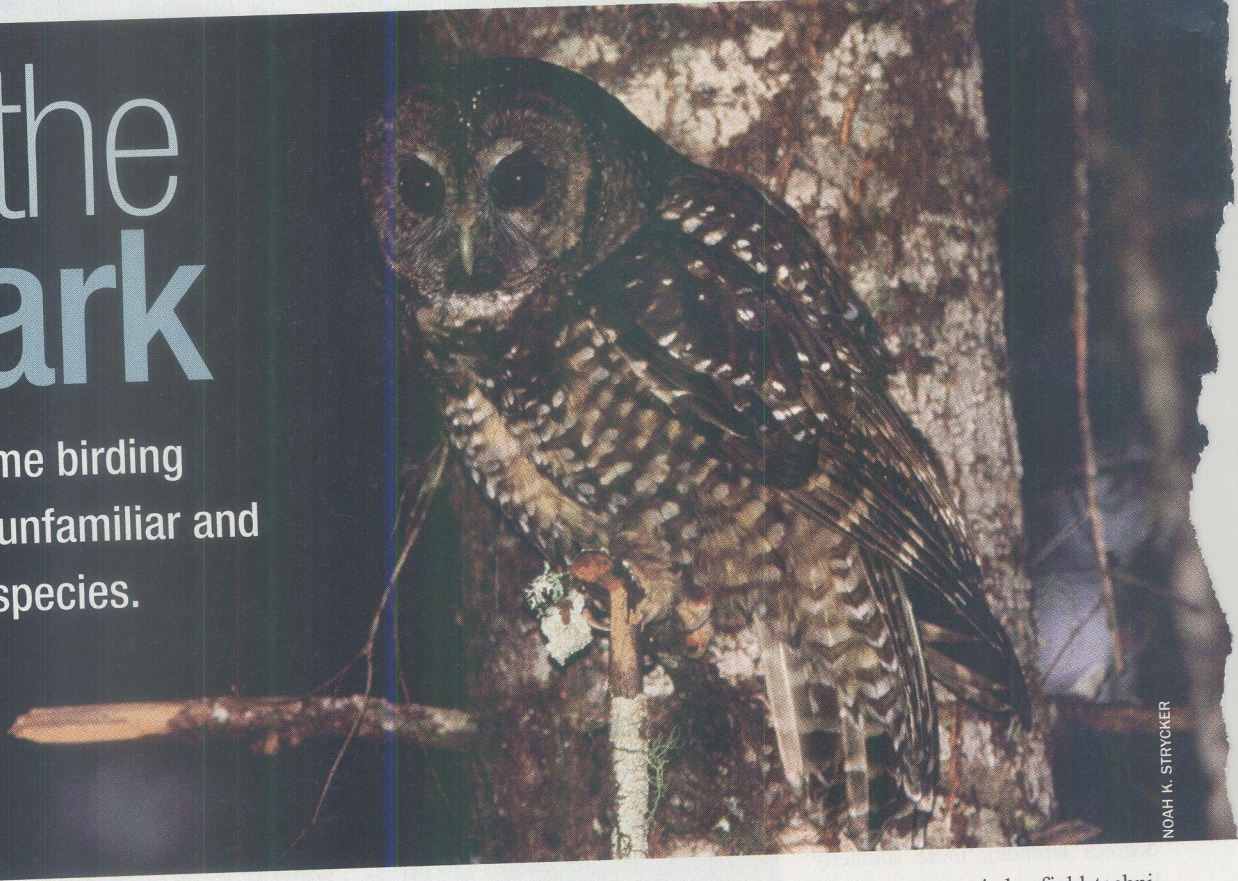


In the Dark

Night-time birding reveals unfamiliar and hidden species.

by Noah K. Strycker



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I hadn't thought to bring a rain jacket. Big mistake. The sleet intensified as we picked our way along a pitch-dark logging road somewhere inside the limits (we hoped) of the Florence, Ore., Christmas Bird Count.

Four o'clock in the morning and the two of us were supposed to find some owls for the count while other local birders slept in. A bend in the steep gravel road looked promising. We jumped out of the car into the hissing squall.

My feet skidded out as they hit icy ground, and I toppled flat over into the roadside ditch. Now slathered with mud and nursing a skinned hand, I tried calling in a Western Screech-Owl. We paused to listen. Nothing.

Again I called. Again we listened. Zip. Dawn found us two hours later dragging our frozen, sleep-deprived souls back into civilization, brutally bird-free.

I'd do it again in a heartbeat.

Like an armless masseuse, nighttime birders are at considerable disadvantage. During nocturnal hours, vision leaves us in the dark, our eyes' color-capable cones replaced by dull gray rods.

Smaller than that of a Snowy Owl, a human eyeball lacks the tubular shape, reflective backing or sensitivity refined by eons of low-light evolution. Nature intended for humans to bask in the light of day. So — call me young and reckless — I itch to explore the after-hours world, to discover what all those night owls do after humans go to bed.

With knowledge and keen ears — not to mention a sense of adventure, technology, patience and luck — I have found that birding under the cover of darkness offers an illuminating experience. In my night-time prowls, I have felt the whoosh of wide-awake nocturnal owls gliding just inches from my face and stumbled upon sleepy diurnal birds, surprising all of us.

Like humans, most birds sleep at night. A few rebels — owls, nighthawks, rails — do the reverse. These are the stars of nocturnal birding. When I venture into the night, it usually is in search of a few strictly nocturnal species.

Spotted Owl surveyors take the ornithological graveyard shift in field work. To monitor Spotted Owl populations, biologists must stay up at all hours.

I recently accompanied a field technician to a known owl site. During the grueling hike in and out through dark, dank, old-growth forest, I fought sleep all the way.

That owl, however, was the easiest bird I ever located. After two hoots from the researcher, the owl flew right in and consumed a sacrificial mouse.

Daytime birds don't disappear when the sun goes down. Diurnal species must find a place to sleep, and savvy birders discover those places. Cavity-nesting birds, for instance, often snooze in birdhouses.

I have watched Black-capped Chickadees go into my bird boxes at dusk and re-emerge the next morning. During a cold winter storm, a friend of mine witnessed 17 Mountain Bluebirds huddle together in one tiny birdhouse to keep warm through the night.

Many land birds look for a dense tree or bush to settle in relative security while they sleep. Waterfowl, on the other hand, might cluster in a dense group in the center of a lake, hoping to be alerted before predators get too close. Albatrosses apparently rest on the wing, shutting off half their brain at a time.