

BOOK REVIEW: *How to Spot an Owl; How to Spot Hawks and Eagles*

by Mark Lynch

How to Spot an Owl, by Patricia and Clay Sutton. Chapters Publishing, 1994. 144 pages (paper); \$14.95

How to Spot Hawks and Eagles, by Clay Sutton and Patricia Taylor-Sutton. Chapters Publishing, 1996. 144 pages (paper); \$15.95.

One of the most frequent requests I get from birding classes and groups is to "show them an owl." I long ago ceased to lead "owl prowls" for several reasons. First, no enterprise is better structured for failure than bringing a group into the forest in the dark in the hope of seeing and hearing a creature that is sensitive to human presence. For success at nocturnal owling, one needs absolute quiet, something that doesn't come easily to a gang waiting around with nothing to do for long intervals. You also need extraordinary patience, and you need to be satisfied with only hearing a distant hoot or squawk. Using tapes to bring owls closer, so the group can see the bird as opposed to only hearing it, easily veers into potentially destructive harassment.

How to Spot an Owl, by Patricia and Clay Sutton, is the perfect primer for those who have never, on their own, searched for an owl. The first section of the book covers all the "how to" owling basics. There are chapters on looking for owl signs, owl nests, and daytime roosts. There is a wonderful section on how to walk through the woods that every birder, potential birder, and anyone who has signed up for a natural history outing should read:

Where do you look when you walk through the woods? At your feet, lost in thought, but hoping not to trip? Or are you so distracted by your inner thoughts that you walk blindly, oblivious to your surroundings, not paying attention, remembering very little about what's around you. This is the first mistake if you are out for owls. Look ahead and around. Any evergreen or tangle is a potential owl roost. (38)

In a chapter on "Equipment Know-how," the Suttons discuss binocs, scopes, and even the pros and cons of various night-vision aids. They do talk about using tapes to get owls to respond, but add several strong caveats about overtaping and using tapes during the breeding season. The Suttons also state that the use of tapes is illegal in most national and state parks. Included is a fine one-page document titled "Owling Etiquette" that every birder and bird photographer needs to read. Example:

5. Upon discovery, sink slowly to the ground to appear less threatening. If the owl no longer feels threatened, you may get to watch it relax — a real treat.

6. If you are too close to the owl and it fidgets and continues to look alarmed (elongated), back off slowly and quietly, keeping your profile low.

The second half of the book is a species-by-species account of North America's owls, with lots of tips on where, when, and how to look for each species. The whole book is sprinkled with personal anecdotes and stories about finding owls. Though perhaps better known to the reading public as dedicated hawk enthusiasts, the Suttons are also passionate and experienced owl watchers. This makes the book an enjoyable read even if you are an old pro at owling. For example, it was interesting to learn that the Suttons make an annual pilgrimage to Plum Island over President's Day weekend, and that they have never failed to see a Snowy Owl at that time.

How to Spot Hawks and Eagles, also by the Suttons, follows the same format as the volume on owls. In Part One, there are good, concise discussions on general identification, where and how to search for hawks, and a good summary of the dynamics of raptor migration. In Part Two, there are species-by-species accounts, including two separate sections on "Southwestern Specialties" and "Florida Exclusives." Each account has information on lifestyle, migration routes, and best locations to see the birds, plus some basic identification clues. The Suttons' years of experience hawkwatching at Cape May Bird Observatory make this an interesting and informative book even for hard-core raptor-seekers. Clay Sutton was one of the authors (with Pete Dunne and David Sibley) of *Hawks in Flight*, the first "holistic" guide to looking a hawks in the air. Throughout *How to Spot Hawks and Eagles* are personal accounts of experiences with these raptors that really capture the magic of hawkwatching.

The "How to Spot" books are profusely illustrated with high-quality color photographs. These attractive books were originally published by Chapters Publishing, Ltd., of Vermont, but are now being published by Houghton Mifflin. There are no new titles for the series in the works. This is a shame because these books are perfect for serious beginners but can also be enjoyed by the more experienced naturalist, as well.

Mark Lynch is a teacher and environmental educator at the Broad Meadow Brook Massachusetts Audubon Society sanctuary in Worcester. He is also a teacher and docent at the Worcester Art Museum and host of the show "Inquiry" on WICN. Two of his favorite owls are the Little Owl found on an ancient Greek skyphos and the tethered owl in the Dutch painting by Hondius, both at the Worcester Art Museum.