



In conversation with **MATTHEW CORDELL,** author-illustrator of *To See an Owl*

Anyone who follows you on social media knows you have a passion for owls.

What first sparked your interest?

I think the first thing that led to my owl obsession is the fact that they are so difficult to find in the wild. Most owl species are nocturnal, so right off the bat, they are most active at the opposite time that we humans are. But they are also incredibly quiet and incredibly camouflaged. If you were to look for them during the day, you could literally walk past a tree where one is roosting and never know it. They stay very well hidden, and their feathers blend in with the foliage astonishingly well. And if you are deliberately looking for an owl at night—when it's already difficult for us to see—their flight is nearly silent, so one could fly by and you might never know. They are just so, so hard to find, which makes seeing one all the more special!

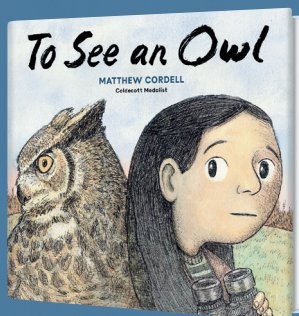
Janie starts an owl journal to organize her owl facts and findings. What are some of your favorite owl facts?

Oh wow . . . so many. Their feathers are extremely soft, which is how they manage to be such silent fliers. But their feathers aren't waterproof like so many other bird feathers are, so if they get caught in the rain, they end up looking like miserable, wet cats! Owls eat their prey whole, even though not all of it is desired or digestible. The parts that they can't digest (rodent hair, bones, teeth, etc.) fuse together into a "pellet," which is eventually regurgitated back up. Their large eyes—that allow them to see in the dark—are not round like human eyes, but rather a long bell-shape, and they are fixed into their skulls in one position. Because their eyes cannot move, they have to swivel their head to see anything that is not directly in front of them. This is why an owl can turn its head nearly completely around on its body. And if they want to look up or down, they bob their heads up and down. It's quite fun to watch. Honestly, I could go on and on with favorite owl facts!

Mr. Koji tells the class that sometimes you have to wait a long time to see an owl, that you need to have patience. How long had you been a birder before you saw your first owl?

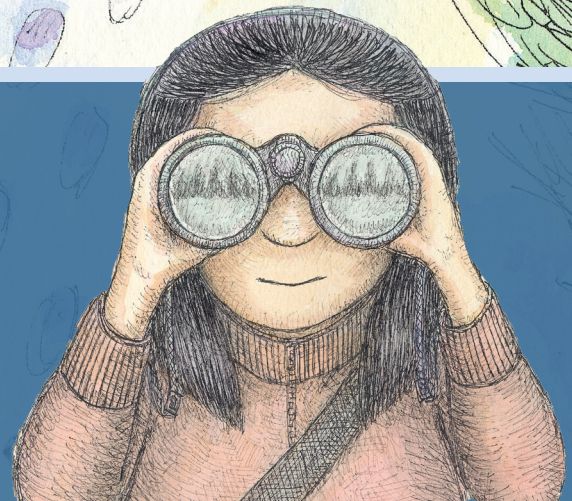
I've had a casual love for birds of prey ever since I was a kid. I wouldn't seek them out, but seeing a hawk or vulture in the sky has always stopped me in my tracks. As far as dedicated birding and identification goes, I'm really just a baby birder in the grand scheme of things. I've only been a real-deal birder for about five years now. I gave in and bought bird guidebooks and downloaded the birding apps on my phone when I saw my first bald eagle fly overhead on one of my daily forest preserve walks. I just really started to take notice of all the birds around me and I was instantly hooked! Not long after that, I realized I'd never seen an owl in the wild. Like, ever. Most people haven't, unless by chance or luck, because

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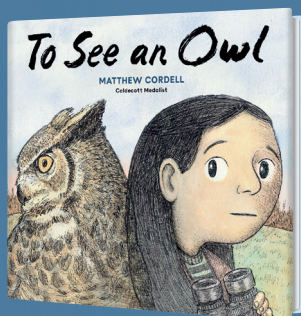
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they are just that well hidden. So I became obsessed with trying to find one. I started waking up before dawn and walking several times a week to try and find one. I went out at night and walked randomly. I never heard any calls or saw anything. Still, being a baby birder, I didn't know anything about owl behavior or habitat or anything, so it was all a bit of a shot in the dark. After, like, two or three months of trying to go at it on my own, I started going out with a far more experienced birder friend I had made in that time. He had more knowledge and experience—what I really needed all along. Within about five times out together, I saw my very first owl on a cold, snowy winter night. There was a full moon, and a great horned owl flew up from the ground and perched on a tree right in front of us. It was breathtaking and surreal. I still get goose bumps thinking about that night.

***To See an Owl* follows Janie's journey to spot her first owl, but the lessons in the book can be applied to many situations. What message do you hope readers will take from the book?**

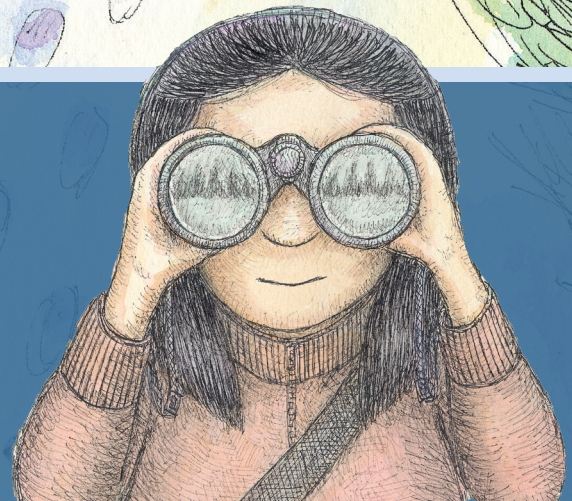
A few things. I hope readers will find a new respect and curiosity for the natural world—or reinforce or grow these feelings if they already exist. I am so inspired by the world that exists beyond our human life. In many ways it is far purer and more honest than the life we live. Humanity is inspiring, too, of course, but it can also be terribly frustrating and disappointing. It has become necessary and rejuvenating for me to step away from our world and into one that exists alongside ours, that we often are too busy to stop and notice. Secondly, I hope readers will get a sense of how special, charismatic, and—as I say in the book—*magical* owls are. I hope that my love, respect, and fascination come across. Owls are almost otherworldly. There are so many living creatures that almost defy reality and logic, and, to me, an owl is one of those creatures. Lastly, I hope that readers will see the value and ultimate reward of waiting. We are living in a time, now more than ever, where we don't have to wait for the things we want. Want to read a new book by your favorite author? Download it or order a hard copy and have it the next day. Want to see a new TV show everyone's talking about? Stream it now. Want to hear the new album by your favorite band? It's just a click away. There are still things in life that you simply cannot have right away, no matter how badly you want them. It's important to understand this, and to experience the uncomfortable feeling that is to wait—for sometimes an excruciatingly long time. When what you are waiting—and have worked—so long to see, experience, or have, is finally realized, it is so cherished and loved. And the journey you went on to achieve that thing is all the more rich and enduring.

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