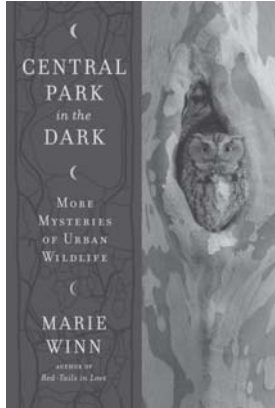


Book reviews

***Central Park in the Dark*, by Marie Winn. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York, 2008. 304 pages. Hardcover. \$27.50. ISBN 978-0-374-12011-5.**

New York's Central Park may not be a destination for most British Columbia birders but it has a surprising amount to offer. This 843-acre oasis of green in the midst of Manhattan is a powerful magnet for birds migrating on the Atlantic flyway. It is designated as an Important Bird Area and considered one of the top birding destinations in the USA. One mid-May morning a few years ago, on a walk led by renowned birder Starr Saphir, we recorded over 60 species of birds: a not unusual total for that time of year, yet quite incredible for the centre of the densest metropolitan area in North America. Not only migrants but a surprising variety of resident birds can be found in the park, including the famous Red-tailed Hawks and a group of re-introduced Eastern Screech Owls.



The hawks were the subject of Marie Winn's earlier book, *Red-Tails in Love*, based on a series of articles she wrote for *The Wall Street Journal* chronicling the story of Pale Male and his nest high on an apartment building overlooking the park. So much public interest in hawks was generated by Pale Male that when the nest was removed as unsightly, it led to "car horns honking on Fifth Avenue in support of Hawks' Rights", and eventual restoration of the nest. Red-tailed Hawks now nest all over Manhattan and with the future of the birds assured, Winn and friends tackled a new quest: understanding the natural history of the park when darkness falls and night time creatures emerge.

Central Park in the Dark is a delightful, lively account of an extraordinary group of naturalists and their adventures in nature discovery—eleven years of night time exploration among the trees, ponds, bluffs and lawns, watching owls, grackles, bats, raccoons, moths, cicadas and slugs. They brave the scary darkness to carefully record the time of owl "fly-outs", identify colourful but confusing moths feeding on an oak tree's sap, and watch for hours as two mating slugs tenderly caress, dangling "on a long rubbery slime string, a gastropodal bungee cord of sorts". Winn's enthusiasm for her subjects, accurate scientific descriptions and witty style, make for an exceptionally well-written nature book. She inspires the reader with the richness of knowledge that can be gained by consistent, regular, careful ob-

servations of the minutiae of nature, carried out systematically over months or years. The group's understandable fear of the dark is overcome as that "powerful inhibitor of fear, curiosity" comes to the fore. "You go into Central Park at night?" people ask, upturn and crescendo on the last word and "their eyes widen in horror"!

Birders will enjoy the stories of the Screech Owl reintroduction and pick up on the subtle undercurrent of tension that this event created in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As members of the Woodlands Advisory Board, a group set up by the Central Park Conservancy, Winn and friends were greatly taken aback to learn from an Urban Park Ranger that not only had some spring peepers, a species of tiny tree frog, been released into a park stream without their knowledge, but a full scale release of Eastern Screech Owl was underway, part of Project X to reintroduce ten plant and ten animal species into city parks. This turned out to be a pet project of the Parks Commissioner and despite the Woodlands Advisory Board's objections the project advanced, with very mixed results. Winn documents the ups, downs, and surprising results of this experiment, which reveals valuable lessons for everyone with an interest in the human "management" of nature.

There is much for the birding reader besides the birds, and it should encourage the broadening of interests and observations towards a wider range of species and to all hours of the day and night. The language is accurate (scientific names are given) yet not technically overwhelming, descriptive and rich yet not sentimental. Despite the vocal disputes that New Yorkers love to engage in, birders and naturalists included, Winn is discrete in her criticisms and warm in her enthusiasm for her friends and fellow "mothers" (to rhyme with "authors"—think New York accent).

Chapter opening line drawings by Lee Stinchcomb add to the visual appeal of the book. As someone who visits Central Park regularly, I would have liked a map included in the book, to help find the many enticing destinations mentioned in the text. However, Cal Vornberger, photographer and author of *The Birds of Central Park* and one of the cast of characters mentioned and indexed by Winn, includes a good map on his website that shows most of the locations (www.birdsofcentralpark.com/birdingmap.htm). Marie Winn also has a website (<http://mariewin.server304.com/>) and her blog continues the story of many of the creatures and people in *Central Park in the Dark*.

I would strongly recommend this book to birders and naturalists, whether or not they plan a trip to Central Park. It will delight with its detailed observations, fluent commentary and lively character portrayal. Anyone who has dealt with conflicting park jurisdictions will sympathise with the struggles around the Screech Owl issue and share with Winn

and friends the hope of a successful outcome. Most of all, we should all be inspired to explore nature in the dark, wherever we live, for who knows what delights await us?

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