

Higher Flight for Owl

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Summer At Bear River, Fred Bruemmer. An OWL Book. Greey de Pencier Books, 1980. 35 pp. \$5.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-919872-52-2.

A Cabin Full of Mice, Janet Green Foster. An OWL Book. Greey de Pencier Books, 1980. 35 pp. \$5.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-919872-49-2.

When The Wolves Sang, Bill Mason. An OWL Book. Greey de Pencier Books, 1980. 35 pp. \$5.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-919872-51-4.

A Family For Minerva, Katherine McKeever. An OWL Book. Greey de Pencier Books, 1980. 35 pp. \$5.95 hardcover. ISBN 0-919872-50-6.

OWL, the award-winning Canadian children's nature magazine, has earned an enviable reputation for high quality and popularity with its faithful young audience. The OWL True Adventure Book Series is worthy of the parent publication. The first four titles of the series appear in uniform bright format; though not very durable in their paperboard covers, they are certainly attractive and of a comfortable size for small hands to hold.

Readers familiar with OWL Magazine will confidently expect exceptional nature photography, happily this is indeed present, and the fine quality paper used for the series does justice to the superb plates. One minor complaint regarding layout: occasionally the text appears printed upon a background of pebbly beach, shadowed snow or shingled cabin roof, and is consequently rather difficult to decipher. Readers at the decoding stage need the simplest of bold, uncluttered printed pages, not hard-to-read special effects, however aesthetically pleasing.

Although there is a fairly strong "family resemblance" among the group, each of the four titles was written by a different author or author/photographer. The individuality of each of the stories lends the collection a pleasing variety of texture and tone without detracting from the unity of what one hopes will be a continuing series. All are promising additions to the roster of Canadian nature literature for the junior reader, and each deserves individual attention and consideration.

Fred Bruemmer's *Summer At Bear River* describes a season's close observation of a group of giant Alaskan Kodiak bears, particularly of one

mother bear and her two half-grown cubs. The cubs are old enough to be faced with the lessons of the wild, and this little picture story takes them to the proud moment shown on the cover, in which one of the cubs captures (more by luck than skill) her first salmon. The adventures of the bear family include the frightening moment common to all young creatures, that first bleak time when mother leaves them all alone in a big world, the first venture into white water and the encounters with wandering stranger bears who may be dangerous. Together these moments comprise an episodic story that closes as the bears amble purposefully off, away from the river toward the mountains. Summer is ending.

All these events are heady stuff for little bears, and for young readers too. One could wish that Bruemmer had resisted the undeniable temptation to give the cubs the Disneyish names Chubby and Timid. This cute anthropomorphism continues the cartoon tendency of portraying bears as big, rather clumsy but lovable people, trapped for some inexplicable reason in fur suits that won't unzip – an attitude that has misled unfortunate woodland novices into underestimating the very real danger that is a part of any encounter with a wild creature, however friendly and cuddly it may seem to be. Still, this particular encounter at the safe remove of a picture story can only please.

A Cabin Full of Mice is delightful, probably even to people who don't appreciate the charms of these uninvited but ubiquitous visitors. The small invaders from the woods are deermice, not the common house mice of the city, although they look somewhat alike. The deermice scramble about in the woodpile and among the kitchen shelves, scavenging for both foodstuffs and materials for nestbuilding. Other wildlife appears on the scene, some of it dangerous to foolhardy mice. One of the bustling little family is taken by a hunting owl, but life goes on uninterrupted for the rest. Life multiplies, in fact, for by now the cabin is swarming with baby mice as well as their parents, and the human cabin-dwellers decide regretfully that the time has come to part company. The mice are captured unharmed, taken away and released in a distant field, and the human family returns to a strangely silent home; but the boldest mouse of all, little Miska, whose picture adorns the cover, reappears in almost no time, and everyone is secretly pleased to see her.

This is a pleasant addition to the popular collection of mouse stories. The nature of the beast has allowed Janet Green Foster to take lovely closeups of an intimacy denied the photographer of more dangerous game. Small readers will be attracted and held by this warm little story.

When The Wolves Sang, Bill Mason's study of wolves living in a northern habitat so remote that they are unfamiliar with and unafraid of man, is a rare adventure into really wild country. Mason was brought in by light

plane, ensconced himself in an igloo, and was able to observe the wolves closely by means of telephoto lens. He had a front row seat for a drama few humans have beheld and fewer have recorded: the daily life of a wolf pack and the caribou hunt by which the pack lives. A description of Mason's studies of the tame wolves provided for him by the Department of Forestry is an interesting contrast to his "wild" observations, and photos of Mason himself, his plane and his igloo, make it easier to envision his lonely observation post.

Perhaps most captivating, certainly boasting the strongest story line of the four titles, is *A Family For Minerva*. This is the warm-hearted story of a snowy owl, crippled by a hunter's bullet and doomed to life in a cage. She is at last provided with a mate, also unable to fly, in an unsentimental animal love story.

The two owls, Minerva and Mars, produce a beautiful family, who when they have learned their necessary survival skills as best mere humans can teach them, are freed to live joyously with their kind. Their adoptive human parents watch them fly away forever with painful pride: it is always hard to let go. At home, Minerva and Mars are busy preparing a new nest

Again, accessibility of the subjects has permitted sensational photography, and the owls are miracles of fierce beauty. It's a lovely story, sympathetically told.

This small, colourful quartet, resplendent in shining green, gold, red and brown, will be sure to please young readers, and will also make excellent read-aloud material. The vocabulary level is beyond the range of beginning readers who may well be attracted by the bright covers, but no matter. Even if the stories have to wait a while, the photographs cannot fail to please.

An interesting feature for older readers is the back-cover map pinpointing the action of the story. One difficulty with this device, however, is the possibility that the reader may take it to mean that this particular species is only to be found in the spot indicated, which is not always the case. An explanatory note might be in order here.

In sum, the first four OWL True Adventure Books are a very attractive package, combining as they do the expertise and professionalism of OWL Magazine with the relative durability and display potential of the hardback book. The set is a must for Canadian children's collections.

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