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Outdoors

Posted on Sun, Mar. 11, 2007

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Getting up close and personal with a really big owl

Who he is: If you want the screech of what may be the world's biggest owl as your cell-phone ring tone, you can have it. Thanks to Jonathan Slaght. He's a 30-year-old St. Paul resident and a doctoral student at the University of Minnesota who is studying the Blakiston's fish owl, a rare and endangered creature that hangs out in northeast Asia.

What he does: Slaght, who is in Russia working with a researcher to learn more about the elusive creature, has been one of the few people to get close enough for a good recording of the Blakiston's vocalizations. And a couple of his recordings — a pair of fish owls singing to each other and a call of a juvenile — have ended up on the Web site of the Center for Biological Diversity (www.biologicaldiversity.org), where you can download the sounds to your cell phone for free, along with the voices of other endangered animals like the Mexican wolf, the Beluga whale and the Oregon spotted frog.

Sounds like? "I have one (a fish owl call) on my phone now," Slaght said. "It's not a pleasant noise."

You're unlikely to hear a Blakiston fish owl any other way. "At least for the juvenile, this is probably the best recording there is," he said.

Why this owl: Slaght said estimates of the number of Blakiston's fish owls in the world range from about 800 to 5,000. "A lot of people say it's one of the most endangered owls in the world," he said.

"They're very cryptic birds. They're very easy to miss," he added, even though with a wingspan of about 2 meters, the Blakiston also may be the biggest owl in the world.

"They're very large birds," Slaght said. "They are neat-looking owls. Their ear tufts are unusual."

The owls live in old-growth river valleys, feeding on aquatic prey. They don't migrate, and they've been threatened by logging, overfishing and other forms of human encroachment.

Why Russia: Slaght is working with Russian researcher Sergel Surmach to develop a conservation plan for the birds. Part of the work will involve trapping about 30 owls and outfitting them with harnesses that will carry radio transmitters. That will allow the researchers to track the birds' habitat use.

To get ready for the work, Slaght trained at the U's Raptor Center in December, learning how to attach the harness by practicing on great horned owls. "It takes about 10 to 15 minutes," he said.

Know someone doing something new, interesting or inspiring in the Great Outdoors? We'd like to hear about it. Contact staff writer Richard Chin at 651-228-5560 or rchin@pioneerpress.com.

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