

## Book Reviews

A NATURALIST ON A TROPICAL FARM by Alexander F. Skutch. Illus. with 47 full-page b/w drawings by Dana Gardner. Berkeley, Univ. of California Press 1980 viii, 397p. 13p. index \$16.95; pap., \$7.95

A lifetime in the South and Central American tropics as botanist, ornithologist and farmer has taught Alexander Skutch much that is fascinating about birds and depressing about their future. He has watched the destruction of birds' habitat by road-building, forest felling and out-of-control burning. His green valley farm in Costa Rica, large though it is, has not been exempt from damage done by other people to birds themselves and to the places birds live. This is perhaps the most reflective of all his books of vivid observations of tropical birds. Though it is somewhat disjointed because most of the chapters are drawn from articles (expanded and revised), it expresses his philosophy of reverence for life and of vegetarianism and his painful view of man's demolition of the natural world.

But confront Alexander Skutch with a bird's nest to watch or a puzzle of bird behavior to unravel and a kind of intent joy takes over and he is absorbed by what he is seeing. In his book "A Bird Watcher's Adventures in Tropical America" (University of Texas Press, 1977), he tells how revolutionaries approached his Costa Rica valley in 1977. Where was Skutch while his next door neighbor was burying valuables? "I sat quietly in the garden, watching a Black-Striped Sparrow's nest."

Even with the disappearance of some of the forest birds, there are still, in southern Costa Rica, tinamous, guans, quails, trogons, hummingbirds, toucans, woodpeckers, woodcreepers, antbirds, manakins, cotingas, flycatchers, honeycreepers, tanagers, finches, and parakeets. Of these, the one best remembered by Skutch is probably a bi-colored antbird who followed the author on his walks, appreciating the insects stirred up, and could be counted on as a faithful walking companion. But equally memorable in bird behavior were the hummingbirds who hung their tiny nests from the leaves of his banana trees, or the soft-wings who burrowed in his garden to build their nests.

He saw the bird migrants from the north, the different ones from the south, and the many who

stayed year round in Costa Rica. In every month of the year, some flowers bloomed. Skutch's crops of coffee, oranges, beans, bananas, cassava, avocados, and mangos were luxuriant, though some of his soil was stony. His house was of his own design, partly built by him. He made his own furniture. In many ways, this book is a biography of an ideal existence in harmony with nature. It is simply and warmly written, with great appeal. And that note of warning against tampering with the natural world is strongly sounded.

A word of praise, too, for the pen-and-ink and wash drawings by Dana Gardner. The antbird who liked to go for walks, the scarlet macaws in flight (one of the birds diminishing in numbers), the wood-rail pursued by an opossum--all of these are drawn with mastery of detail, pose, and composition. And the many others match them in feeling for the subject and knowledge of botany and zoology.

OCT 27 1980