

*A Naturalist on a Tropical Farm.* Skutch, Alexander F. 1980. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 307 p.).

Alexander Skutch has emerged as one of the great naturalists of our times. His numerous articles in scholarly and popular journals, several monographs, and his three books have catapulted him among the leaders of the pack of field biologists. His first book, *A Naturalist in Costa Rica* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1971), is a landmark in studies of natural history in the tropics. His second major work, *Parent Birds and their Young* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976) was followed shortly by *A Birdwatcher's Adventures in Tropical America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977) which takes us on a fascinating bird watching tour through Central and South America. His latest

book, *A Naturalist on a Tropical Farm*, is a welcome addition to the bookshelves of any naturalist for it provides even more insights into the natural history of wild creatures in Costa Rica.

*A Naturalist on a Tropical Farm* brings together Skutch's observations of plants and animals conducted over four decades on his small farm nestled on the forest-clad slopes of Costa Rica's central highlands. The book is organized into 23 refreshing short chapters. The first one introduces us to the setting of Skutch's homestead. The second takes the reader through seasonal changes dictated largely by the fluctuating pattern of rainfall; a smooth flowing text highlights the landscape changes in response to shifts in precipitation. The bulk of the remaining chapters displays the fruits of long and careful observations on the behavior of birds in the field, a cornucopia of

new information for biologists interested in ecology.

Although most of the book is dedicated to elucidating the life cycles of birds, and to a lesser extent mammals, lizards, and fish in the world, Skutch enriches the book with entertaining chapters on domestic animals and engrossing explorations into the relationships between humans and other animals. The charming and frequently humorous chapters dealing with cows, homes, chickens, and cosmology broaden the range of readers who will be attracted to the moderately priced book.

The major strengths of the book are its extensive treatment of the behavior of wild animals. Skutch's wanderings into the meaning of man's existence are not especially enlightening to this writer, but will no doubt find many appreciative readers. Skutch argues that predation is a basic evil and is a major cause for the distressing state of affairs in human society and the violence of the animal

world. He proposes a *laissez-faire* attitude for wild areas, and a harmonious association with living creatures close to home. This non-interventionist, vegetarian viewpoints reminds one of the teachings of St. Francis of Assisi and Thoreau.

An idealistic lifestyle of caring and almost total gentleness to other creatures may be a little romantic. Even Skutch admits to swatting bothersome mosquitoes. Although Skutch does not kill animals for food, he ducks that moral dilemma by selling livestock for which he no longer has any use. The author does not deal convincingly with the role of predation in nature, its function in helping to check herbivore populations and in accelerating nutrient recycling. Furthermore, predators are among the most beautiful of beasts: witness the awesome stealth of a jaguar, or the majesty of a crested eagle in flight. Predation is not an aberration of evolution, but an essential

ingredient in ecosystem homeostasis. There is no reason for naturalists not to try and place man's existence in the larger panorama of the cosmos, but few, if any, seem to stumble on any blueprint to guide us.

The book, nevertheless makes inspiring reading and is highly recommended. Skutch's use of crisp English and colorful imagery ignites and sustains the reader's interest:

"In a blaze of light, the sun floats up above the wooded ridge beyond the river. The landscape, still intensely green after the long months of rain, is soon flooded with sunshine so intense that it appears to be of some palpable substance." (pp. 15-16).

The text relegates most of the scientific names to the index which helps tame the imposing nature of some scientific writing. Dana Gardner's superb illustrations of plants and animals enhance the book.

Skutch's long and intimate association with the vegetation and animals that live on his farm has provided him with a clear impression of landscape changes wrought by the influx of settlers into the valley where he lives. Gone now are the raucous calls of macaws and the piercing whistles of Baird's tapirs. Most biologists who study the tropics live in urban areas and only make brief forays into the countryside. The bulk of research conducted by North American and European ecologists in the tropics occurs during the northern hemisphere summer. Skutch has had the privilege of living through many wet and rainy seasons in the Neotropics. *A Naturalist on a Tropical Farm* provides a beacon for those who yearn to acquaint themselves more intimately with nature in the tropics.

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