

*A Naturalist on a Tropical Farm.* By ALEXANDER F. SKUTCH. (University of California Press, 1980.) [Pp. vii + 397.] Price £10.25.

The farm, 'Los Cusingos', lies about 2000 ft up on the Pacific slopes of the Cordillera de Talamanca in Costa Rica, in an area of abundant rainfall supporting tropical forest. The naturalist, Dr. Alexander Skutch, is surely the most experienced in tropical America and one of the most skilled in writing of his observations. He was trained and for a time did research as a botanist, then turned to birds, and then became a practical farmer, having decided that the best way to devote himself to tropical natural history was to settle on the land; but he never tried to do more than farm in a small way, and kept about half of his farm under forest. Now, after nearly 40 years, he has been writing extensively about his experiences: this is the latest of four autobiographical books, and perhaps the most satisfying as it deals with an area that he knows intimately.

The chapters are varied, ranging over plants, wild animals and domestic animals. The longest chapter, 'A Tropical Year', describes the changing seasons on the farm, from the dry early months to the long wet season beginning in April. This is probably the best account available of seasonal changes in Central America, based as it is on data systematically accumulated over several decades; it would be invaluable for anyone contemplating field work of limited duration in Costa Rica. Other notable chapters deal with humming-birds, small mammals (especially the agouti), passion-flowers, and the individual histories of some of the domestic animals that lived on the farm. Dr. Skutch has a profound respect and consideration for all other forms of life; his treatment of his farm animals stops far short of exploitation, and while it may make his kind of farming uncompetitive in the modern world it deserves careful study by anyone who is concerned about our relationship to other animals. His scruples also prevent him from catching and marking the birds that he studies. This inevitably entails some loss of interesting information, and will not commend itself to most modern ornithologists—but on the other hand who else has ever had such patience and dedication in watching at the nests of so many species, some known hardly at all, and accumulating, and publishing, such a mass of new observations, whose value will outlast that of many more 'modern', theoretical contributions?

*A Naturalist on a Tropical Farm* is very well printed and produced, in an unusual but not unattractive square format, and is abundantly illustrated with black and white drawings by Dana Gardner, who spent some time at Los Cusingos for this purpose and has succeeded in giving the reader a visual impression of the farm and its inhabitants to complement the impression gained from the text. The combination has resulted in a most delightful book.

D. W. SNOW