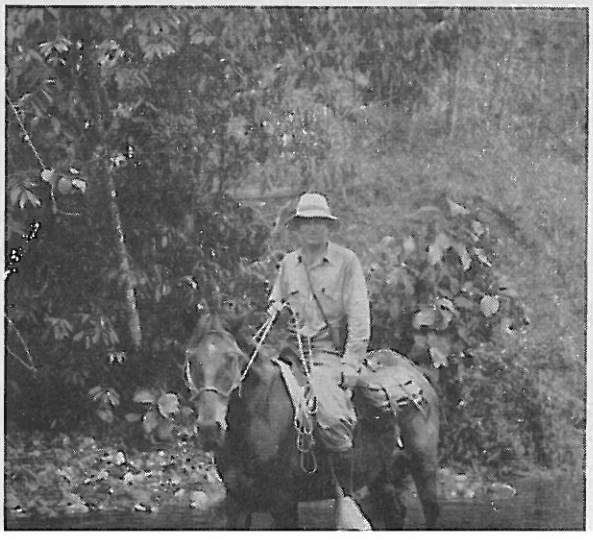
Back—or Forward—to Nature?

By ALEXANDER F. SKUTCH

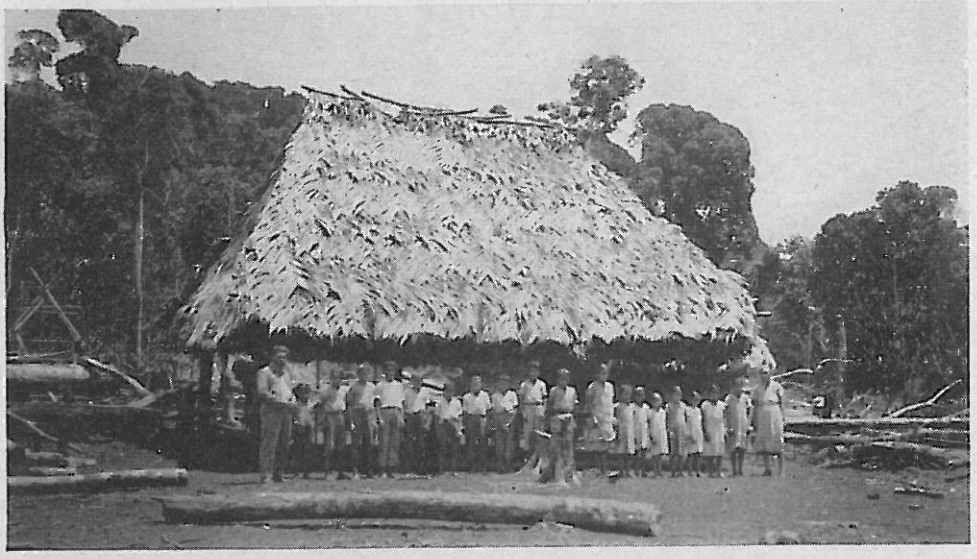
WHEN I settled on a farm at the edge of the wilderness in Costa Rica, I did not look upon this move as a "Back to Nature" experiment. As a naturalist working in tropical countries, I had already lived under primitive conditions long enough to forecast with fair accuracy the kind of existence I should lead on the farm, and how I should react to it. Life in the wilderness had its attractive points, but also many sides not so agreeable. These I shrank from and would have avoided if I could. Still, I wanted independence, leisure to pursue my studies of Nature and to write about them, an outdoor life—and this seemed the most practicable way to attain my desire.

I was also familiar with the reports of others who had tried the experiment of living close to Nature, particularly that of Thoreau. After I was well settled on my farm, I made a mental comparison between my situation and that of the philosopher of Walden Pond a century earlier. Thoreau went to dwell in the woods because he wished to simplify his life, to hold communion with Nature, and to accomplish a specific task, the writing of a book. My own objectives were much the same. Thoreau planned to stay for only a couple of years and made himself a rough hut with the boards from an Irish laborer's shanty. I expected that my sojourn would be much longer, so I hired carpenters to build the most comfortable dwelling that slender means and difficulties of transportation would allow—a house that my rude neighbors seemed to look upon as little short of palatial, although it was crude enough by the standards of more cultivated communities, lacking the most elementary conveniences. Thoreau planted a patch of beans and provisions on borrowed land, and worked it with his own hands. Although I bought my farm chiefly for the forest that grew on it and the river that bordered it, I acquired—and this is what chiefly I was obliged to pay for—a few acres of sugar cane, a little plantation of coffee, a grove of bananas, orange and lemon trees, and far more pasture than I wanted. Since so much hard-earned cash went into these things, it seemed no more than prudent to try to derive some income from them. Accordingly, I needed laborers to help me work the farm. Thoreau dwelt alone and apparently prepared most of his own food, but he could buy meal or flour, shelled rice, and many other things that I could not obtain, or only at too high a price. Here in the backwoods, where corn had to be ground, and rice shelled, by hand, where beans would hardly soften with less than two hours' boiling, the preparation of food was so time-consuming a task that I needed a cook.

This is, we are certain our readers will agree, a significant and thought-provoking article. Its author, Dr. Skutch, shown below astride his horse as they ford the Rio Sonador in southern Costa Rica—is both naturalist and philosopher. He also has rare dominion over the written word. In this penetrating story of what it means to go back—or forward—to Nature Dr. Skutch writes from personal experience, and with frank and valuable objectivity. We believe that what he has to say is eminently worthy of its first position here.



On the material side, I seemed to have the advantage over Thoreau, if being responsible for a larger establishment can properly be considered an advantage. But considering less tangible values, Thoreau's situation was in many respects preferable to mine. Walden was within a short hour's walk of Concord, then a brilliant center of literary and intellectual activity, and, moreover, the home of his family. My nearest village was some eight miles distant, over a rough and rocky road, uphill and down, through muck and mire, over bridges that often trembled alarmingly beneath my horse's weight. I must ford mountain torrents that rose so rapidly beneath the afternoon downpours that, through much of the year, I



Palm-thatched school in a wild part of southern Costa Rica. Elementary education is compulsory, and the government tries to provide schools for all children, but many families live in spots so remote that children cannot attend school. In the wild schools may be primitive.

was never quite sure when I set forth in the morning whether I should be able to return home that same day. And San Isidro, a backwoods trading center that during the construction of the Inter-American Highway acquired many of the unsavory characteristics of a boom mining town, was to Concord as Sparta to Athens. I had no relative within two thousand miles or so. Thoreau could hold intercourse with his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson; Emerson could talk to me from the printed page, but could not answer my questions. Thoreau could borrow books from the well-stocked library of Harvard College. So many rough miles separated me from any source of books that I needed a small library of my own.

But in one respect I would not willingly have changed places with Thoreau. I enjoyed the grander prospect. My dwelling looked upon the highest peaks in the country—giant mountains rising above tropical forests to bare and craggy summits 12,500 feet in the air. The woods beside my house, with their towering trees, graceful palms, spreading tree-ferns, and orchids of many kinds, were far more beautiful than the second-growth pines and hickories about Walden Pond. The birds and butterflies that flew among them were of brighter and more varied hues than those he knew in New England.

Within less than a year after I bought my farm, the Western Hemisphere became involved in the second World War, and, as a result of increasing difficulties of transportation and communication, I was thrown back upon Nature and my own resources to a far greater degree than I had anticipated. Friends who I had hoped would visit me and help to study the life of the forest were unable to come. Soon tools and supplies of all kinds became difficult or impossible to obtain. Since I was just beginning, there were many essential articles that I still needed; I had not even a garden hoe or a rake, and could not get them. Before long it was hardly possible to find rivets for mending broken harness, or wire to put together a dilapidated cooking pot. New ones were hardly to be bought at any price. For a short while, as on a month's camping expedition, it is a valuable and stimulating experience to be cut off from outside sources of supply, and to test our own skill and ingenuity in improvising what we need from what the forest provides. But these makeshifts are rarely so satisfactory as factory-made articles, and to be dependent upon them for long periods is irksome as an unnecessary waste of time and effort.

From the first, even more distressing than the scarcity of equipment was the difficulty—almost the impossibility—of obtaining accurate information about anything; of finding people with skill or training for any task whatever, except perhaps those rough labors performed with axe or machete. Those of us who grow up in a community where, for a reasonable fee, we can command nearly all the knowledge and all the skill that sixty centuries of art and science have accumulated, can hardly realize what it means to be cut off from these advantages. Whether I needed to survey a farm, dig a well, draw up a contract, plaster the walls of my house, or cure a sick animal, it was scarcely possible to find anyone who had the necessary experience and could do these things in a competent fashion. Not that there was an absolute lack of people who pretended to perform these services, for there was no small demand for some of them in the community. Accordingly farms were surveyed, in a woefully inaccurate manner, leading to nasty disputes between neighbors. Wells were dug—and struck rocks that nobody knew how to penetrate. Ambiguous contracts were drawn up between illiterate people who had no notion of contractual obligations—and bad feelings ran high. Cattle became sick and were subjected to barbarous treatments that finished them off in a hurry.

During my first year on the farm I bought a milch cow, which before long gave birth to an unusually pretty calf that I named Io. When Io was a sturdy heifer not yet a year and a half of age, she suddenly began to languish, apparently as a result of the bite

Here is the farm and home Dr. Skutch has established for himself in southern Costa Rica. His house is seen in the center. It is from this spot that his several fine articles on Central American wildlife have come to us, and, most recently, this immediate story.

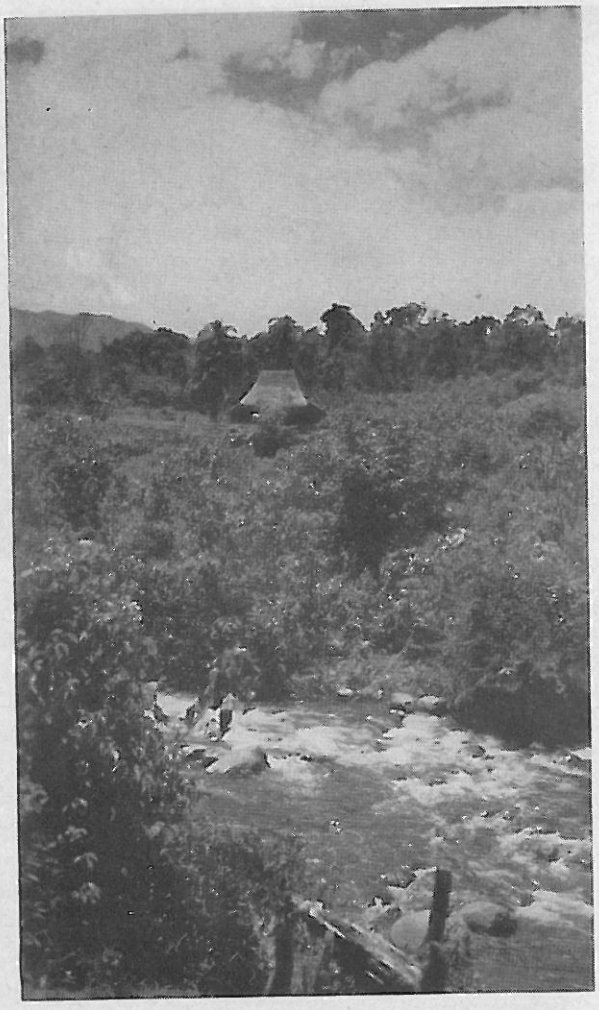
of a vampire bat that had inoculated her blood with the germs of some infectious disease. Day after day she grew feebler. To have brought a veterinarian from the distant center of the country would have been prohibitively expensive, and he could hardly have arrived in time to save her. There was nothing to do but ask the neighbors who raised cattle what ailed my heifer and what remedy to apply. Some of the explanations of her malady were ludicrous; some of the treatments that were suggested savored of the medicine of the twelfth rather than the twentieth century. Both diagnosis and remedy were wide of the mark. So Io died most miserably and was buried; and less than two months later Pandora, her mother, went the same way. I thanked my stars that, having no wife or child, I could not be called upon to stand helplessly by and watch them agonize in a similar fashion.

Meanwhile, I had been in correspondence with the chief veterinarian at the Agricultural College, far off over the roadless mountains, and had learned the name of the infection to which my cows had succumbed. It was exasperating to have lost two fine animals from a disease so readily prevented and not at all impossible to cure—if one knows what to do and has the facilities. To forestall further losses, it became advisable to vaccinate the horses, the two oxen, and Pandora's little orphaned calf. Since there was no one within miles upon whom I could call to make the injections, I perforce had to do this myself. To inoculate an animal with five cubic centimeters of bacterin calls for neither long training nor great skill. Yet, as with all other apparatus, there are little details connected with the use of a veterinarian's syringe that the novice is apt to overlook—with lamentable results. It is grand and noble to blunder along for five years, or ten, or an entire lifetime, in the effort to invent a new machine, or perfect a process useful to mankind. But to bungle an operation that thousands can perform with ease and skill makes one feel stupid, ineffectual, unprepared.

But perhaps the most cogent answer to the question of whether we wish to go "Back to Nature" is provided by the contemplation of people who long ago went back, and have for generations lived under fairly primitive conditions—my neighbors, for instance. Whether one considers their minds or their bodies, they are not an attractive race. Taken as a whole, they are undersized, poorly proportioned, have bad teeth and uncomely features. About half are illiterate, and an amazingly large proportion of them were born out of wedlock. Although nearly devoid of religious feeling, they perfunctorily keep all the numerous holidays of the Catholic Church, without having any conception of their significance. Their wedding feasts usually end in drunken brawls, and their funerals are hardly more decorous. They know scarcely anything of the history or traditions of their country. They find it at least as easy to lie as to tell the truth. They have neither books, games nor music to occupy their leisure, but spend the long, rainy afternoons sitting around in their thatched huts, spitting on the floor, and repeating ugly gossip about their neighbors. The more intimately I penetrate their minds, the more nauseated and alarmed I become with what I glimpse there. Avarice and envy, malice and hate seem to be the chief driving forces of many of them. Some pass as being more clever than others, but theirs is a huge stupidity thinly covered by a low and catlike cunning. They make helots of their children, who, far from exhibiting the innocence, trustfulness and joyful abandon in play which are the charm of childhood, are shrewd little imps who can bargain with the best, and at the age of twelve or fourteen know all the tricks of the trade —nearly all that they ever will know. This is a general picture of a population very mixed as to race and antecedents. A few individuals are distinctly superior to it, but on the whole I believe that it is a true picture.

However it may be with animals, with their often complex, highly-developed, innate patterns of behavior, everything there is of nobility in the character

of man comes through culture, through the cumulative efforts of many generations to improve themselves and their offspring. Only thus are his wild, unruly, selfish passions tamed and mitigated. Perhaps the one purely innate characteristic in which man can justly claim superiority over other animals is his greater capacity for education. We are what our parents and teachers and ourselves have made us. We must slowly raise ourselves above the mire through our own stern efforts toward self-discipline. It is pleasant to believe that we come into the world "trailing clouds of glory"—perhaps. But a truer allegory of human life is of the seed that falls into the mud and slowly, precariously sends a green shoot up into the sunlight. The traditions, the disciplines, the institutions that help to mold a noble human character are not found amid the forests. Perhaps the most admirable characteristics that are spontaneously fostered there are *endurance* of hardships and *patience* under adversity, both of which are needed.



The Rio Pena Blanca flows in front of the author's home, and across the stream is a neighbor's ranch.

Would we, then, go "Back to Nature"? How far back would we go? To pioneer ancestors of a few generations ago, who lived on intimate but by no means friendly terms with Nature; whose chief study was how to destroy her; who burnt the forests, wore out the soil, annihilated the passenger pigeon and all but exterminated the beaver and the buffalo? Or would we go farther, to the Old Stone Age, when our remote forefathers dwelt in caves, covered themselves with skins, and crept through the forests in mortal fear of the wolf, the sabre-tooth tiger, the mammoth, and their neighbors of other tribes—to a period without books, without science, with only the first rudiments of art? Or would we return yet farther into the mists of past ages, to those ape-like anthropoids who are supposed to have dwelt among the tree-tops much in the fashion of monkeys—which I have never considered the happiest or most highly endowed of wild creatures? Perhaps the prospect would be more attractive if we could, by reversing the process of evolution, return to a condition resembling that of the song-birds, with their perfected instincts and clean, free life amid the trees, the sunshine and the flowers.

But we can never "return" to a condition of life resembling that of the birds, because we never passed through a corresponding stage of development. Doubtless, if we trace the ancestry of men and of birds back far enough through the aeons of geologic time, they converge upon some primitive vertebrate stock. But since that inconceivably remote epoch, both men and birds have come a very long way, and by widely divergent roads.

Yet in this tortured modern age we badly need to draw nearer to Nature. We need to refresh our souls with the beauty of Nature, the outward calm of Nature, the apparent simplicity of Nature. We lean too heavily upon each other, and each man finds his neighbor a frail and undependable support. It is more salutary to lean upon Nature, who is often cold and severe, but rarely treacherous or deceitful. We have become more anthropocentric in our thinking than any preceding era of which a record has been left. Earlier ages enthroned gods of human form in the skies above; now we make gods of ourselves, and can find no sanction for morality or religion apart from our own more or less selfish desires. Nature will teach us that we are only one among her many children, and perhaps not her best-beloved.

If we need to draw nearer to Nature, yet would not go back to her, the alternative seems obvious—we must go forward to Nature. To go back to Nature would entail the abandonment of all our hard-earned conquests of culture, art, science, law, philosophy and technology. To go forward to Nature, we shall need all that we have in these fields—and a good deal more. Uncultured people can hardly walk through the woods without leaving ugly tell-tales of their destructive passage; with growing culture, we learn to love the wood-rose, yet leave it on its stalk. As ornithology advances, naming the birds with a gun gives way to the neater and more satisfying method of naming them without a gun. The more that science teaches us of Nature's secrets, the more stimulating and rewarding do our contacts with her become.

As the applied sciences are perfected, they approach nearer and nearer (Continued on page 498)

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to Nature's methods. In agriculture, we are slowly learning how to draw our sustenance from the soil without destroying it and turning whole districts into barren wastes; the more advanced our agriculture, the less land we need bring under cultivation to produce a given quantity of food, the more forest we can preserve. In forestry, we are discovering that the best practice is that which interferes least with the natural growth and reproduction of the woodland. In nutrition, we are having our eyes opened to the fact that natural foods are more healthful and economical than foodstuffs elaborately processed, with the waste of great quantities of substances necessary to our physical well-being. Medicine, which not long ago was infected with such distrust of Nature that doctors spilt the life-blood of patients who most needed it, has now made an ally of Nature with a hundredfold increase in power. As jurisprudence is perfected, laws become less arbitrary; we see more clearly that they are for the common good, and obey them as scrupulously in the wilderness where there is no one to watch as in the city under the eyes of the policeman. As technology progresses, we enjoy on lonely farms and homesteads many of those advantages, as electricity, rapid communications, music, which a short while ago were to be had only by living in crowded cities.

Amid the forests, one is profoundly impressed by a truth that economists have long known—that in our efforts to gain time for the cultivation of the higher values by the simplification of our lives, we may go too far. The most effective means of diminishing labor yet discovered is through its division. If every man had to perform for himself, with his own hands, all the tasks necessary for his daily existence, it is probable that no book would ever have been written, no picture ever painted, no difficult scientific investigation brought to an end. It takes no longer to boil the beans for ten persons than for one. To go forward to Nature we shall undoubtedly need to simplify our lives, divesting them of all the empty noise, the gaudy fluttering tinsel, the aimless and profitless rushing about, which now devour our time and wear out our energy; but looking squarely upon those fundamental requirements of human existence that can be most easily satisfied by giving more rather than less attention to scientific and organized methods of production.

We still have a long way to travel to reach Nature by the forward path, and there is danger that before attaining our goal we shall have mutilated her out of all recognition. But here and there one detects a hopeful sign that we are on the right road.

[Just as this issue was about to go to press with this article, Dr. Skutch dropped in to see us, on the eve of his return to Costa Rica. He is working on a popular book on the birds of Central America.—ED.]