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## BOOK REVIEWS

**LIFE HISTORIES OF CENTRAL AMERICAN BIRDS** (Families Fringillidae, Thraupidae, Icteridae, Parulidae, and Coerebidae). By Alexander F. Skutch. Cooper Ornithological Society, Pacific Coast Avifauna No. 31, Berkeley, California, March 25, 1954. Royal 8vo, 448 pages, with colored plate and text drawings by Don R. Eckleberry, plus photographs of scenery and habitats, in all 68 text figures, with a Foreword by Alexander Wetmore. \$10.00.

This beautifully presented work is merely a momentary culmination of the author's distinguished life work begun in the Central American tropics in 1928, which has resulted in many important and notably well-written publications, which have deservedly brought the author world-wide recognition and an award of the Brewster Medal of the American Ornithologists' Union.

Most happily the Introduction gives us what many friends and admirers have long wanted to know, and that is a complete account of his wide travels in Central America from the high mountains of Guatemala to the lowlands of western Panama and the Canal Zone, in many varied faunal areas and every possible altitudinal life zone. These were mixed with quick trips to the United States for museum study and bibliographic research. With slender means, supported chiefly by the collection and sale of botanical specimens, and without any institutional support, Skutch stuck grimly to his self-appointed task and has become unwittingly the Audubon of tropical American bird study, wisely refusing to plunge yet again into the maelstrom of systematic museum collecting, but to try for something which all other field workers had never attempted — a veritable tour de force.

The reviewer can here speak with feeling as well as admiration. He, too, is an old hand at Central American birds, has traveled just as widely as Skutch, and has some personal acquaintance with every Central American species mentioned in the text, but he chose the systematic, or museum, approach, and it is questionable if his contribution will be so large or so lasting. The

discipline exacted in his younger days was one of iron severity. Unrecorded nest and eggs required collecting of the nest as well as both parents. If you wished to report the song of a certain bird, you had to shoot the singer and bring the specimen back to a museum before venturing to do so. Success was measured by the quantity as well as the quality of specimens brought back, and not by the volume of field notes. Mr. Skutch, with really great genius and intuition, has not fallen into the trap of modern opera glass observers in the United States. With very rare exceptions he has confined his studies to common, well-known and familiar species, readily identified in life after conscientious study and experience. His papers do not teem with great rarities involving remarkable range extensions, involving his word alone. The point is well worth emphasizing, as that is exactly what more and more opera glass birders are doing in Mexico and elsewhere, furious that competent ornithologists will not accept or publish their range extensions after their first hectic dash into tropical America!

The volume before us contains the biography, or life history, of some forty species, divided among the five families of the "nine-primaries" Oscines, or song birds, now the subject of extensive revision and proposed reclassification. Easily and clearly written, the text contains a truly marvelous wealth of comparative illustration, and tropical birds are freely compared to what is known of their northern allies. This is best brought out in five sections entitled General Summary of Information on each family. It will introduce the reader to some of the chief problems, or biological mysteries, of tropical birds. (1) Why is nesting success so poor; (2) why do the nesting and incubation periods last longer; (3) why is the egg clutch usually less; and (4) why is the breeding season so irregular or so protracted? Mr. Skutch has given considerable time and thought to revising or inventing English common names, usually with happy results, as his acquaintance with other species of the genus is so wide. Nevertheless, it must

**BOOK REVIEWS, cont.**

be admitted that diagnostic or attributive names cannot be found for every species or generic group of tropical American birds, and, happily, the Index supplies the Latin name, so that a pedant like me can find out what bird the author is talking about!

The author and publisher are to be congratulated for a splendid job well done, and it is devoutly to be hoped that means will be found to publish two more volumes of life histories, which the author says he now has in manuscript.

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