

ecologic

by DAVID GRABER

The recent torrent of new books about nature muddies a particular characteristic of this kind of literature: Whether the books themselves be fat or thin, grand and gloriously illustrated or typographically pure, romantic, mystical or deadly classical, whatever real knowledge there is in each has come after months or more likely years of painstaking study and thought. Most information about natural history these days is the product of long, tedious, sometimes dangerous but always wretchedly underpaid work by university graduate students. To these dirt-workers of science this selection of books is dedicated. The next time you read about intricacies in the hummingbird's life or the social arrangements in a honeybee colony, keep in mind the labor underpinning those few fascinating lines . . . particularly labor perhaps not done by the author.

A Naturalist on a Tropical Farm by Alexander F. Skutch (University of California: \$16.95; illustrated) is old-school natural history of a kind that has almost disappeared among university types. In a series of essays constructed with grace and great attention to detail, Skutch distills a tiny portion of his 40 years of observing wildlife at his Costa Rica farm. These are "scientific" records in their precision; Skutch mea-

sures nest-burrows and counts eggs and correlates rainfall with food production, with peaks and troughs in animal abundance.

Skutch also is a philosopher and a recluse from society. Skutch the vegetarian clearly prefers the smaller and less voracious creatures, especially birds; in an astonishing closing chapter, he condemns carnivorousness as an evolutionary *evil*. In orthodox scientific circles, this would be heresy or at least the height of silliness. Skutch doesn't care; he's independent of all that. His mass of careful observation in one of the less-known quarters of the planet is of inestimable value; forest preserves such as his become all that is left of the primeval American tropics. Bird lovers should especially treasure the sensitive quality of his avian reportage.