

X A NATURALIST ON A TROPICAL FARM.

By Alexander F. Skutch; illustrated by Dana Gardner.
University of California Press, Berkeley. \$16.95. ix +
397 p.; ill.; index. 1980.

The author's name is very familiar both to serious ornithologists and to amateur birders interested in the avifauna of Central America. He has written many technical papers, popular articles, and several books, among them the charming *A Naturalist in Costa Rica* and *A Birdwatcher in Central America*. All are based on his forty years of living on a farm in the rain forest of southern Costa Rica. As a farmer, however, he has sublimated the urge for enrichment from his land to the stronger desire for living in harmony with the wild creatures surrounding him. He describes many of the birds, animals, and even insects inhabiting his 250 acres, about half of which are in old forest and much of the remainder in second-growth woods. His keen and patient observations are especially notable in the chapter where he takes us through the tropical year; anyone who believes that there are no significant seasonal changes in the tropics will be convinced otherwise. In addition to his unashamed affection for his wildlife neighbors, he tells of the warm relationships he has established with his domestic animals, treating them as sensitive creatures, each with its own personality, rather than unfeeling machines to serve him. It is refreshing and quite rare to find a serious naturalist who can write so movingly and sympathetically about the creatures, both wild and domestic, with whom he shares his life. The book is lavishly illustrated with excellent black and white drawings.

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THE IMPERATIVE CALL. *A Naturalist's Quest in Temperate and Tropical America. A University of Florida Book.*

By Alexander F. Skutch. University Presses of Florida,
Gainesville. \$20.00. x + 331 p.; ill.; index. 1979.

In this delightful book, the author modestly refers to himself as a "birdwatcher." He is, as will be readily acknowledged by anyone interested in the fauna and flora of Central America, far more than this somewhat patronizing term often implies. A. F. Skutch has a distinguished reputation as a major voice in neotropical biology. Moreover, his is an extremely articulate voice. His writings, covering several popular books and many scientific articles, are eminently readable. In this work he tells of his early life in Maryland and, later, Maine, where he quickly developed a passion for the outdoors, which automatically thrust him into a career in biology. This brought him to Jamaica, Panama, Honduras, Guatemala, and, eventually Costa Rica; once he had savored the rich natural wealth of the tropical forests and savannas he could not resist the desire to devote the rest of his life to Central America. He carved a farm for himself out of Costa Rica's mature forest, and in doing so increased the diversity of his surroundings, thus adding to the habitats available to his feathered neighbors. Unlike most of the farmers in that part of the world, he cared deeply for the native wildlife, and one gathers that he spent far more time studying birds than in making a success of his farm. Yet he cannot claim to be a true ecologist, for on many occasions he admits to killing snakes and other raptors that were threatening the birds he was studying. This compassionate man must be forgiven for this small violation of natural law. His love for his subjects obviously transcends his scientific instincts, formidable as they are.

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