

APR 17 1981

from
THE EVENING SUN
BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

Friday Book Review

Pikesville to the tropics: the lure of bird study

THE IMPERATIVE CALL. By Alexander F. Skutch. University Presses of Florida, \$20.

A NATURALIST ON A TROPICAL FARM. By Alexander F. Skutch. University of California Press, \$16.95; paperback \$7.95.

ALEXANDER F. SKUTCH is a Baltimorean by birth and education. He holds a Ph.D. in botany from Johns Hopkins, briefly taught that subject there and then became a professional botanist.

Yet he is now a resident of Costa Rica and, with botany made secondary in importance, is internationally known as the unrivaled authority on the ways of life of Central American birds. In the first of these volumes he tells how these transformations came about.

He sketches his boyhood in the area about Pikesville in the early years of the century, when that community was a true village surrounded by farms and woods. At an early age he began to make detailed natural-history observations.

He discovered, for example, the red-headed woodpecker's habit of caching food in tree crevices for future use, and found out how the laurel's buds are protected against winter's cold.

As a Hopkins undergraduate he traveled farther afield. He made major studies of seaweeds on Mount Desert Island, Maine, and of the banana "tree" on Jamaica. Tree in quotation marks because this plant is not a tree, but a gigantic herb. Its trunk is not wood, but simply the bundled, overlapping bases of the 25-to-30-foot-long leaves. Skutch here makes the banana a thing of surprising interest, and it was his studies of it that gained him his doctorate, plus a research fellowship with a fruit company in Panama.

A hummingbird that began a nest just outside his laboratory window there then opened his eyes to the fascination of bird behavior. He recorded the bird's activities — related in "The Imperative Call" — and began to seek out and watch other species. Then, finding there were no books on the habits of tropical birds, he decided he could make a greater contribution to science by discovering these than he was likely to do as a botanist.

By now he has produced five volumes and scores of journal papers of scientific ornithology, three previous books for the general natural-history reader, and two on philosophy. Like his other general works, "The Imperative Call" deals with more than birds and plants; it contains much about other animals, notably a sloth and an armadillo, and accounts of the countryside and the people.

The second of the new volumes tells how, having decided upon his aim in life, he searched Central America for a place in which he could settle permanently and achieve it. On the Pacific slope of southern Costa Rica he found one: a bird-rich tract of about 250 acres including much high forest, but also patches of coffee, sugar cane, bananas and other fruit trees. He bought it and became naturalist-farmer.

Over two years he built himself a five-room house, choosing a regional type of construction called *bahareque*, which enabled him to use, except for a single bag of cement, local materials and productions entirely. One feature of this building method, incidentally, is that "the walls (be) thinly covered with fresh cow dung, an excellent binder. This at first made a horrible stench, but it soon dried to a soft gray, odorless surface, which was admired by certain visitors ignorant of its origin."

At this point the author abandons chronology and, after a month-by-month account of the tropical year, discusses birds, other animals, and flowers individually or by groups. He also devotes two chapters to man's relations with other creatures.

Himself a practitioner of the way of life called in India *ahimsa*, which Mahatma Gandhi defined as "the avoidance of harm to any living creature in thought or deed," he often found his roles as both naturalist and farmer involving him in perplexities. But although he concedes that practical life forces some compromises, he vigorously upholds the principle of *ahimsa* as an ideal.

Of his bird stories in this volume, the most dramatic is that of a hummingbird that already had tiny young when he found her nest. For all of 24 further days, a strange female haunted the vicinity and harassed her every time she brooded and fed her babies. Yet she succeeded in raising them.

Entertaining, too, is an account of an anti-bird that for 16 months followed Dr. Skutch about whenever he entered its part of the forest, snapping up the insects he flushed as he walked.

The scarlet passion flower gets a chapter to itself because of the elaborate adaptation of its blossoms to pollination by birds. So, although it is not native to Central America, does a flame-of-the-forest tree that he obtained, because of the creatures it attracted.

Alexander Skutch has a penetrating mind, extreme sensitivity to everything about him, and a talent for clear, vivid writing. These books should delight anyone with an interest in natural history. Both are illustrated, the first with 50 photographs, the second with 40 drawings by Dana Gardner, a California artist.

— HERVEY BRACKBILL