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Maryland Birdlife

A NATURALIST ON A TROPICAL FARM

Alexander Skutch, 1980, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California, 405 pages, \$16.95

The naturalist and the farmer, both ^{through the} choice of their professions surrounded by Nature's living plants and animals, may often be in opposition to each other in their perceptions of Nature, the farmer manipulating Nature to get it to yield crops to be sold at profit, the naturalist studying Nature as it appears in the wild, gaining profit, if any, from photographing and writing about his observations. Alexander Skutch, well known naturalist of Central America, successfully combined these two contrasting points of view when he established a 250 acre farm along the bank of Rio Penas Blancas, 2500 ft. up into the mountains of Costa Rica. He has lived there for almost 30 years, every day finding beauty in the life histories of the plants and animals from which he gets his food as well as records of scientific observations for publishing. Los Cosingos, as he named his farm, is the local name of the fiery billed aracari, a bird which continues to persist in spite of the many changes ⁱⁿ ~~around~~ the area. Skutch, a Maryland-born, Hopkins-educated naturalist with botany and ornithology his specialities, is a master at nest watching, having published some of the first studies on nesting behavior of tropical birds. The reader begins to understand the patience of the author, who ~~admits~~ ^{after 40 years} admits there are birds which/still continue to elude his observations while they are maintaining their nests. The story of Skutch's developing friendship with Jimmy, the bi-colored antbird, is an interesting contrast with his account of the lives of his own domestic chickens. These two sides of his interests... the wildlife found in his forest and the farm animals and plants dependent on his care..... have presented problems, easy answers to which he has not found. The chapter "Which Should I p Protect?" shows the depth of his thinking and offers the reader some principles for answering questions of wildlife management.

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I like this about Skutch, that he injects his philosophy of life into his account of natural history. My own reason for studying about bird life is not to compile a list of 700, but to find out more about Life itself. The last chapter of the book, "Photosynthesis and Predation" is a thought provoking idea, new to me: photosynthesis, ^{the} "basic good of the living world" and predation, the "basic evil" I'm waiting to hear from anyone who reads this new addition to Cylburn's NOS library to talk it over. The author expresses his idea clearly enough, but it does demand some discussion, I believe. Mr. Skutch made it plain in a letter in response to his last book I reviewed, "The Imperative Call", that he has no immediate plans to return to Maryland where ~~he~~^{we} might be called on ~~him~~^{him} to enlarge on these statements.

The book contains 50 black and white illustrations by Dana Gardner of such true character that one does not miss the intense colorations of the tropical life they depict. An index is included and a few footnotes.