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Skutch, Alexander

## Skutch books detail life of a tropical naturalist

*A Naturalist on a Tropical Farm.* By Alexander F. Skutch. University of California Press, 1980. 407 pp. Hardback \$18.95. Paper \$7.95. ANS sale price, \$6.95 hardback.

*Nature Through Tropical Windows.* By Alexander F. Skutch. University of California Press, 1983. 383 pp. Hardback \$19.95. ANS sale price, \$6.95 hardback.

Reviewed by Jack DeForest

Alexander Skutch was awarded the John Burroughs Medal in 1983 for excellence in nature writing. It was a well-deserved tribute to the renowned tropical naturalist. A native of Maryland (b. 1904), he earned a Ph.D. in Botany (1928) from Johns Hopkins and then traveled in the Latin American wilderness for a dozen years. His subsistence level lifestyle coupled with extensive collecting, studying, and writing activities paralleled that of the pioneer 19th-century naturalists in North America.

In 1941, he settled in Costa Rica's valley of El General and dedicated his life to studying tropical nature. With a 250-acre homestead (named "Los Cusingas" after a colorful toucan) for a living laboratory, he developed a tropical farm in the midst of an incredibly rich natural endowment—e.g., nearly 300 species of birds on his property in a year. Over the next 40 years he produced a landmark series of publications dealing with the breeding biology and natural history of tropical American birds. His unique contribution to New World ornithology is an outstanding achievement.

Naturalists of all persuasions will enjoy the chronological story of his residence in a tropical paradise, its trials and tribulations, the rewards and satisfaction. Elements of his on-going activities remind one of the comparable experiences expressed by another dedicated naturalist, Edwin Way Teale, in his *A Naturalist Buys an Old Farm* (Dodd Mead, 1974). In

the case of Teale's temperate zone Connecticut environment, however, the species diversity was relatively insignificant, albeit equally fascinating to the careful observer. In the tradition of Thoreau, both men focused attention on small things while living in harmony with the surrounding natural world.

Skutch escorts his reader through a tropical year. The species response to the rainy season and periods of drought is revealed in a sensitive narrative ranging from the fruiting plants to bird migration and his relationship with domestic animals. Life cycles are explored in a way that clarifies how human population pressures and technological "advances" impact tropical ecosystems. The changes he has witnessed over a half century make it difficult to be optimistic as rampant deforestation continues unabated.

Two chapters are particularly philosophical in tone, "Which Should I Protect?" and "Photosynthesis and Predation." In the former, he elaborates his search for guiding principles of human behavior toward wild creatures. Rejecting Spinoza's view that there is an unlimited right to exploit, he has more sympathy with W.H. Hudson's maximum, "Neither persecute or pet." For wild areas, he accepts this laissez-faire approach as the best policy, while the principle of harmonious association and the desirability of human intervention may be justified in the intimate surroundings of a homestead as in the case of feeding wild birds.

Photosynthesis is considered "the basic good of the living world," while "predation is the basic evil." He is uncomfortable with Paul Errington's widely accepted view that "predation is a part of the equation of life" and should not be judged by human moral standards [see, *Of Predation and Life* (Iowa State, 1967)]. In a thoughtful argument, Skutch does apply a human value assessment. Few ecologists would accept his controversial thesis and general indictment of misguided evolution. What appears to be brutish and wasteful in nature has contributed to sensory capacities of both predator and

prey species—and population control. Energy recycling and food web realities suggest both photosynthesis and predation are vital components of life's complex rhythm.

In *Nature Through Tropical Windows*, Skutch recounts his experiences in literally observing various bird species from a cabin window. The blend of scientific sketches and philosophical inquiry is appealing. The book is a natural extension of *Tropical Farm*. In a delightful essay, "Miniatures and Giants," he argues persuasively in favor of little creatures that "benefit the plants that nourish them" by pollination and planting seeds. Further, they are generally more colorful, have prettier voices and are better builders than the animal giants. There is an instructive discussion of tropical forest regeneration and the on-going panorama of competition and cooperation in a complex ecosystem.

In conclusion, "the Naturalist's Progress" is a philosophical gem. He traces six sequential stages of a naturalist's development, including collecting, classification, explanation, concern for the inner life of nonhuman creatures, moral dilemmas in their treatment, and the eternal question, what is the significance of it all? He believes the student of nature is "aware of the endless diversity of creation . . . the startling contrasts between supreme beauty and appalling ugliness . . . between beneficent growth and destructive fury." (p. 345) It is a baffling world and a genuine challenge to perceive one's place in the scheme of things. These essays describe one man's effort to understand.

These books provide the reader with a spectrum of ecological fact and spiritual renewal. Few individuals have produced so much of value over a long life in relatively isolated and primitive conditions. By many measures, the author is a very rich man! Unfortunately, the type of natural paradise Skutch has enjoyed over the years may be unavailable to future generations unless *Homo sapiens* develops some self-limiting capacity in reproduction and the control of destructive technologies.

The books are attractive in organization, format, and handling quality. Dana Gardner's illustrations add a pleasant dimension to the insightful text. Readers will find many rewards in joining the author on a vicarious Costa Rican field trip.

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