

A Hundred and One Natural History Books That You Should Read Before You Die

6. Alexander Skutch's *A Naturalist on a Tropical Farm*

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Alexander Skutch needs little introduction to any enthusiast of tropical birds. Skutch was born in the United States, but he spent more than sixty years living on a small farm in southern Costa Rica observing and writing about Neotropical ornithology, natural history, and conservation.

In *A Naturalist on a Tropical Farm* (published in 1980), Skutch recounts the pleasures and pains of his years living under what would be for many of us quite primitive conditions on the edge of the jungle while pursuing his Thoreau-esque quest to “live simply in an unspoiled natural setting, while studying nature like a scientist, all without harming the objects of my study, or the other living things around me.”

Early chapters tell of his finding of the farm on the Pacific slope of southern Costa Rica, the cycle of the seasons, and his initial attempts at building and planting. Further into the book, the focus shifts to the plants, animals, and particularly the birds of the surrounding region.

Skutch had a wonderful eye for detail, and he gives his readers the stories of particular species in narrative form – throughout his life, even though he was the author or co-author of more than 200 papers and

technical publications, he was opposed to what he regarded as excessive reliance on quantification and statistics. While his first love is clearly the wild birds at the edges of his farm, he also recounts stories of the care and raising of the domestic livestock that provided him with the food and transport that made life on the farm possible. Some of these accounts – like a discussion of the parasites that infected cattle – are not for the squeamish, but it is clear throughout that he held a deep affection for and appreciation of the animals that served him.

His style of writing, although certainly “old school,” immediately draws the reader in with a deep meditative cadence that weaves back and forth between specific observations of behaviors and events and Skutch’s interpretations and the concerns that emerge from his personal philosophy.

Skutch was intensely concerned with the destruction of the remaining wild areas of the tropics and deeply committed to having as little impact as possible on the species that he encountered. Yet he was also guilty of paradox – he kills any snake that he sees threatening a nesting bird, and then wonders at his inconsistency at taking sides in a war of predator and prey.

He had the luxury of observing the wildlife of Costa Rica while much of the country was still relatively untrammelled and before the rise of insistent “eco-tourism” had turned bird watching into a contact sport. It is our generation’s luxury to have had such an astute observer of nature leave a written account that cannot but draw one to

appreciate at least some of the remains of the world that he saw in a more complete form.

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