

OTHER

Walking Wild Shores: Portraits of the Natural World

By Kevin Winker. 2013. Two Harbors Press, 212 3rd Avenue N., Suite 290, Minneapolis, MN, USA, 55401. 353 pages, 16.95 USD, Paper.

This is a nicely-written collection of travel tales and adventures based on the author's experiences in mostly wild areas, both in the line of work and of living in Alaska. As Curator of Birds and a professor at the University of Alaska Museum of the North, Kevin Winker has had plenty of opportunities to find himself in out of the way places and on perilous edges. His recounting does a service to the armchair field researchers amongst us as well as those who might enjoy hearing of someone else trials and joys similar to their own. Many chapters evoke really wild, natural places complete with dramatic weather and physical conditions. It is the kind of book you might take one chapter at a time, when you want a change from your day-to-day, whatever it may be.

Most chapters are stories time spent in the field, from the Aleutian Islands to Mexico, Singapore and

Siberian Russia. Of course, as it's the reason behind most of his travels, Winker leads us into the objectives of his research, mainly studying patterns and processes of avian evolution. To that end, collecting sufficient samples of birds for study, mostly by shotgun, recurs often from beginning to end of the book. This includes an account of trying to collect an elusive Pacific Wren on the Aleutian island of Amlia. It reads like a true hunting pursuit, except the quarry is so tiny. Think of the wee, flitting wren, seemingly taunting from impossible cliffs and crevices, popping out and then disappearing, only to emerge for a split second somewhere else. It might be the most challenging chase in the book. Collecting animals that others seek for viewing pleasure does put one in a sort of unfriendly spotlight sometimes. Winker offers an explanation of the importance of maintaining and continuing bird collections

for ornithological study and conservation and at the end of the book offers a reading list on the topic.

Daily life chapters have us perching on ledges in roaring river canyons using dip nets to nab salmon speeding by, or driving a car in extremely cold weather when the doors don't want to close and really nothing wants to move at all. We took a tour through the frantic pace of summer work, both in the office and out, necessary and also made possible because of long summer days and long winter nights. We also glimpse some of the more unusual personalities populating Fairbanks.

Field work and travel headaches appear often; they're all part of the lifestyle. You might be surprised to learn that, although Alaska is very close to Siberia, someone wanting to travel from Fairbanks to Novosibirsk could more likely be routed through Minneapolis, Amsterdam and Frankfurt. Have you ever had to empty a cylinder of liquid nitrogen into a drainage ditch at 2:30 in the morning before travelling to the airport for your flight home from Singapore? Then, you have to worry about your specimens staying frozen

while you endure delays of many connecting flights and border officials who don't want simply to accept your many permits at face value. How about having to modify your collection plans because you couldn't get shotguns in Mexico on account of the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas? And then there's all that proposal writing and applying for permits, permits, permits. And then, does anyone ever go for a road trip in Alaska without at least one spare tire? No. But what if your one spare is flat too? That stuff you buy in a spray can to stop the leak in a flat tire really works ... for a while.

If you enjoy reading about all the interesting things that can happen to someone else (and who doesn't enjoy that, really) and would like a dose of gorgeously-conveyed wildness, you might have a look for this book. It could be just the thing for a current or future ornithologist or, indeed, an armchair biologist, on your gift-buying list.

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