

## Snapper

By Brian Kimberling. 2013. Pantheon Books, The Knopf Doubleday Group, 1745 Broadway, New York, New York 10019 USA. 224 pages, 28.96 USD, Cloth.

A few months ago, I read a disquieting article in the New York Times on declining bird populations written by Brian Kimberling. While the article was interesting, and well-written, and of course depressing, it also contained a reference to a book by Kimberling entitled

Snapper. I was immediately on alert. A book about “my” species? Was I being scooped? Or did this have nothing to do with snapping turtles? I rushed to Amazon, a few keystrokes south, and to my horror, yes it was about snapping turtles, though apparently not en-

tirely. Nevertheless, a few more excited keystrokes and in the next day's mail there arrived a small book with an attractive dust jacket decorated by colourful Audubon-like drawings of birds, which turned out to be Audubon drawings. Not a dust jacket one would associate with snapping turtles. I hurriedly opened the book to scan the Table of Contents. There was none, but there were chapters and Snapper was the title of chapter 2. I settled back in my Lazyboy and started on chapter 1 to build up suspense and prejudice for chapter 2. Thus began a wonderful read of many vignettes by a most accomplished writer and, I surmise, naturalist, on the life and times of a budding biologist/ornithologist named Nathan Lochmueller. Although this is an autobiographical novel, one cannot help feel it is far from entirely fiction. The "snapper" takes up only one chapter and it is obscure to me how the author chose this title for the book. "A Biologist's Adventures among the Rednecks of Southern Indiana" would get more attention and reflect the content better. Even "Ramblings about an Ordinary Youth" or "My Hopeless Love Life while Studying Eagles" might be more attractive to potential readers and still better reflect the story.

Lochmueller is a 20's-year-old biologist, born, raised and sort of maturing in southern Indiana. The book chronicles bits and pieces of his life. Like Bob Dylan's recent "autobiography", *Chronicles*, this book leaps about with no respect for time and skitters among topics and times without rhyme, reason or warning. To me the writing style, the incorporation of a smattering of interesting natural history, and the description of the lonely, impoverished, slavish life of the underpaid, overworked, dedicated and unappreciated neophyte naturalist makes this a fascinating read. Indeed, I will say without qualm, anyone who is not captivated by the end of chapter 1, is no one I really need to know, and vice versa.

I read the whole book in one short day. I like short books. I liked this one enough that I have since read it more slowly and deliciously twice more. One would like to say it is slightly reminiscent of Stephen Leacock, but sharper, more poignant and critical, edging toward Mark Twain, or even Jon Stewart of the Daily Show. I like his preface quote, "While there is a lower class, I am in it, while there is a criminal element, I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free". Or the opening sentence. "I got my job by accident."

The book swerves and slips between amusing yet awed descriptions of Nathan's ornithologist boss, who reminds me of many brilliant biologists I have known and whom I found awesome, and amusing, but never close to. Other memorable characters populate the narrative including, his rogue aunt and uncle from Texas, the Hoosier natives of redneck Indiana, the ivory tower residents of Bloomington, home of Indiana University, and a few feckless friends. But the narrative always returns to Lola, the Maggie May (à la Rod Stewart) love of his life, or at least youth. No male, regardless

of his sexual orientation can read this book, and not admit he has known a Lola. Especially if that male was somewhat aimless, and spending six days a week scouring woodlands to map the frail lives of obscure wildlife in the undergrowth. The recent bird researchers in Algonquin Park kept appearing in my picture of young Nathan.

Consider his description of finding the nest of a Kentucky Warbler; "It's like staking out the girl's shower block at summer camp. It can be done, but it takes skill." Oh, hello Hugo.

My problem in reviewing this book is that I want to quote vignettes to reveal the clever humour, the wry regret, the observer's forgiveness, the blatant stabs, the dazzling mix of arrogance and self-deprecation and the pithy commentary on modern humans and our institutions. And the touching and hilarious depiction of a lost opportunity with a woman afflicted badly by Lyme's disease. Nathan attributes to her the description of the Mississippi as "a vast national sow prone to rolling over her young". Nathan then pauses to refer to the ivory-billed woodpecker as Elvis in feathers for both gaudy plumage and regular sightings since declared extinct in 1944. We ecologists all have our Elvis.

Nathan ends his saga of Dana the Lyme's girl by comparing her to his great love, Lola. Lola "belonged to that air conditioned world, Dana understood the squalid and menacing nature of things...the snap of events, Lola's independence was a vain inglorious thing, and my own spotty affair with Lola struck me as trivial, something that dropped out of my sleeve or back pocket, probably not worth picking up." Needless to say, Lola was falling from grace at this point, but she repeatedly reappears, although it is not clear whether it is before or after the above conclusion.

Chapter ix is titled 'Proof'. It describes how Nathan marked a forest of trees by carving Lola's name on all those marked for felling by the US Forest Service plus many others (to temporarily confuse the USFS, a hopeless tactic I confess to using in my youth). I trust that all we Luddite nature lovers have done similarly hopeless things to thwart developers à la Edwin Albee. Nathan then describes a court proceeding utterly reminiscent of my experiences before the Ontario Municipal Board. In this case, a tribunal hears arguments from both sides in a dispute (the cutting or not of trees in a "nature reserve"). This proceeding before a tribunal occurs, "when one side has no prospect of winning". Nathan recounts that the case failed because "it was tried in Indiana, where science, education and Darwin are all equally deplored". The defendants were the US Forest Service whose primary function is "to facilitate timber sales", and the US Fish and Wildlife Service which "truly reveres all woodland creatures provided they can be shot, trapped, hooked, netted or clubbed". At least we know where he stands. Nathan goes on to describe how the lawyers for the defense systematically destroy his credibility and the affidavits of sev-

eral leading ecologist and explains, “a lawsuit is not a work of art, and its aims are to obfuscate what it cannot denigrate until money is free to speak”. Such cynicism!

In the end, Nathan comes to some, for me, surprising conclusions, and the fearsome spectre of Darwin rears its ubiquitous embrace. But earlier, our hero thinks back to his days following avian domestic lives, recalling his time, “wandering vast tracts of Indiana woodland and riverbank, taking orders from no one, chronicling the lives, births and deaths and domestic disputes of forest songbirds for biology departments and gov-

ernment agencies. I reveled, like . . . John James Audubon, two hundred years before me, in the same extraordinary beauty and variety there – reduced every day, by human encroachment, but resilient and resplendent nevertheless”. I can’t think of a better summary of my own life in the wilds of Ontario and I am sure this echoes the experiences of many readers of the *Canadian-Field Naturalist*. This is a book to be treasured.

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