

Voles, Not Moles: a Personal Journey Connecting with Nature

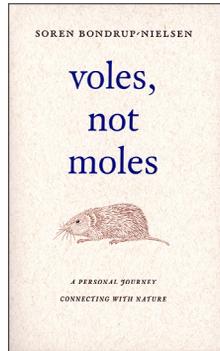
By Soren Bondrup-Nielsen. 2021. Gaspereau Press. 240 pages, 29.95 CAD, Paper.

This book, the fifth the author has published with Gaspereau Press, is essentially an autobiography interspersed with rather clichéd admonitions about how Western society has lost its way and become disconnected from nature. These tiny sermons—possibly drawn from Bondrup-Nielsen's lecture notes from a long career as a biology professor—include comments on evolution, ecology, conservation, and the joys of living alone, or close to it, in the northern forests of Canada, Scandinavia, and Russia.

I should clarify that I have a particular interest in this book, because Bondrup-Nielsen's career is eerily parallel to mine. I am slightly older, but we had similar academic careers, both spending time at the University of Toronto and the University of Guelph, both working on birds for our Master of Science degrees and microtine (i.e., voles, lemmings, and muskrats) rodent ecology for our Doctor of Philosophy degrees, and both spending time at the Algonquin Wildlife Research Station. We also both attended meetings with fellow microtine researchers in Scandinavia, and we have both ended up living only a few kilometres apart in retirement in Nova Scotia. I am sure we must have met, but although I immediately recognized his name and face, I can't recall meeting him. These connections made me eager to read this book as the title reflects an amusing misconception we vole guys face.

Voles, Not Moles begins with Bondrup-Nielsen's early life in Denmark where his parents gave him the freedom to roam the outdoors (or what remains of it in Denmark). Eventually, his family emigrated to the United States, but they returned to Denmark after a year. When Bondrup-Nielsen was 13 they moved to Canada. At the end of this brief family history, he digresses into a discussion of human overpopulation and an outline of some principles of genetics.

Bondrup-Nielsen then outlines how he became a biologist, attending the University of Guelph where he was initially interested in becoming a veterinarian. His description made me realize that he missed being a student in my first year teaching the Animal Kingdom course by one semester. Although he correctly extols the importance of evolution, he never took this subject at Guelph, and the professor he



praises as a great teacher was an outspoken denier of evolution.

Bondrup-Nielsen's writing style is unusually dry and serious. He includes details like the name of the ship he took, the kind of truck he was driving, the details of setting up his trapping grid, the materials with which he built his pens, and how he placed and joined the sections. Yet he describes meeting his future wife and their romance in one sentence: "Pia and I went to the Zoological Museum where 'events took a turn'. The next fall Pia gave birth to our daughter" (p.130).

He describes very nicely how he built his study pens, and how he designed and tested his hypotheses. But I have done these things—making trapping grids, setting mouse traps, measuring voles—and these activities are not exciting. I studied ecology of collared lemmings (an animal that spends much of its time underground) and attached radio-transmitters to them so I could at least occasionally watch them gallop about and socially interact on the earth's surface. Red-backed Voles, Bondrup-Nielsen's study species, are rarely visible in the wild, and he seems uninterested in describing them beyond inferred reproductive strategy. Even if one loves nature, it is difficult to get attached to microtines if you can't see them.

This book gives good descriptions of how to design field experiments, but poor descriptions of how to connect with nature. Too often, Bondrup-Nielsen describes shooting birds for dinner, but he never describes the birds, the voles, or anything else, except his owls. He seems to have no interest in biology beyond his own research. He kills or traps large numbers of voles and shoots other things in passing. Getting in touch with nature seems to be about roughing it in the bush, hiking, chopping trees, skiing, building shelters, and occasionally killing animals for food. I like these things too; however, as a reader, I want to know what it is about nature that grabs his attention and makes him feel a part of it.

Overall, the book has some charm, but it is also dull and pedantic. There is no clear connection between Bondrup-Nielsen's clichéd environmentalism and his research. He has written four other books and two of them have titles matching chapter titles of this book. I would guess that *Voles, Not Moles* might be in some parts condensed from the earlier works.

This book reminds me of my uncle George. Every year, George went on a family trip and took many slides. Months later, our family would be subjected to a slide presentation. What I remember most was how George would create text slides to describe shots

or places. Somehow, this book reminds me of those slideshows. Charming, sometimes interesting, but always plodding and often skipping over details I expect would be of importance to the reader.

RON BROOKS
Professor Emeritus, University of Guelph
Guelph, ON, Canada

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