

Tracks

By D. C. Jackson. 2006. University Press of Mississippi, 3825 Ridgewood Road, Jackson, Mississippi USA. 279 pages. U.S.\$25. Paper.

Tracks is a collection of 23 short essays, each ranging from 2 to 26 pages. Each essay is built around a personal story of hunting, fishing, trapping or ramblings, and Jackson uses these narratives to provoke thought and contemplation regarding our interactions with and place within nature. While I think his goal is very worthwhile and of great value to anyone interested in understanding our relationship with the environment, I found that he was only sometimes successful. Often the stories are simply entertaining anecdotes, and some essays miss the mark entirely. This is not to detract from the compilation however, as a range of success is to be expected in such a compilation of wide-ranging individual stories. When successful, the author is very insightful and provides much food for thought.

Given this objective however, the musings and philosophies are somewhat confined and repetitive in that all are focused around stories of exploitative nature (hunting, fishing, trapping) whereas some of a non-exploitative nature (camping, hiking, canoeing, drifting, etc.) would be welcome. Such a broader approach would illustrate the connection between a contemplative man and nature in a way that does not require the taking of life. As is, I am left with the vague unease that to "connect" with nature it is necessary to kill something. Dr. Jackson is a professor at Mississippi State University and, given that, I would have appreciated some stories and deep reflections arising from his time in the field on his research. It would show the natural environment giving rise to musings in some other aspect of his life besides the exploitative areas of fishing/hunting/trapping.

Tracks is an interesting book, though I would not recommend it as a must-read. Sometimes the "philosophy" or musings felt forced, but at other times they were very appropriate, flowing from the personal anecdote. The first chapter "Wilderness Before Dawn", really captured my attention and made me hope that I was in for great insight and original perspective. This hope, while not entirely fulfilled, was not entirely defeated either. These essays are clearly intended for a broad audience of readers and in many ways refreshed exquisitely enjoyable past memories for me. I grew up on stories from the magazines *Outdoor Life* and *Field and Stream*, and the stories here are a cross between that type of article and a primer on environmental ethics. As a bridge between outdoor adventure stories and a contemplative approach to nature it is very successful. In addition, while I may not have gleaned profound new insight from the writings, I did learn, and think I have a better appreciation, and respect for, the Deep South of the United States over that when I began the book.

All-in-all *Tracks* is a pleasant read but I would not recommend it as delivering particular insight or a message that we have not heard previously (with the exception of "Wilderness Before Dawn"). For those interested in the rural culture of the Deep South (at least several decades ago), it would be a very useful book. It is the type of book, I think, which is best read in front of a warm fireplace on a cold winter night.

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Why Don't Woodpeckers Get Headaches? And Other Bird Questions You Know You Want To Ask

By Mike O' Connor. 2007. Beacon Press, Fitzhenry & Whiteside Limited, 25 Beacon Street Boston, Massachusetts 02108 USA. 209 pages. U.S.\$14.95.

The book *Why Don't Woodpeckers Get Headaches?* is a collection of letters submitted to *The Cape Codder* in the "Ask the Bird folks" column, and answered by Mike O'Connor who is a bird watcher, the owner of a birding store, and a born comedian. The letters ask questions of interest to any backyard birder, ranging from how to attract Bluebirds, to buying the bird bath that's right for you (and your birds) and how to get rid of a squirrel infestation.

The book is divided into eight chapters, each related to a particular area of backyard birding. The first section deals with bringing birds into your yard. O'Connor gives several important tips to attract various birds to your yard, such as having a proper nest box, leaving food that is suited to the birds you hope to attract, having suitable habitat, and most importantly, if you want these birds to stay in your yard, offering birdhouses

with low rent, an example of the author's humorous approach.

Other chapters of the book deal with food issues such as: Peanut Butter is it safe? What birds can you attract with oranges? Should you replace your rotten seeds? Another chapter discusses providing some basic comforts for your avian friends: selecting a quality bird house is obviously a key issue, and is talked about extensively. It is safe to conclude from the various entries that, in housing birds, simplicity is key, and while the four story summer villa with the small picket fence and lawn included may look great at the store, your birds would probably prefer the cheaper wooden box. Also, providing a heated birdbath is quite important; contrary to popular belief, birds don't enjoy a chilly swim in the middle of December any more than we do.

Even though this book mostly deals with attracting birds, and encouraging their visits, there is an entire section devoted to bird-related problems. People write in to ask: Why are some woodpeckers more attracted

to metal chimney caps than the peanut feeder? Why do birds insist on chirping in a new day at 4:30 in the morning, right outside their bedroom window? And of course, the timeless question; How to stop their new bird feeder from becoming an all-you-can-eat diner for the cunning gray squirrel? O'Connor provides excellent and thorough advice for his readers, even if he hasn't found a sure-fire solution to the squirrel problem.

Why Don't Woodpeckers Get Headaches is a fascinating collection of people's backyard bird triumphs and tragedies. O'Connor is a talented writer, whose quick wit and edgy humour had this reader crying with laughter. Not only does he answer readers' queries with accurate and detailed opinions, he also provides a brief

background look into the bird's appearance and behaviour. The illustrations by Catherine E. Clark are well done and the birds are easily identifiable.

This book is aimed at readers of all ages, and all birding-skill levels, from novice to expert. It is well written and gives a new and often amusing perspective to the world of back yard birding. Even people who are not interested in birds will have a great time reading this book and I would recommend it to anyone. So why don't woodpeckers get headaches? Well, if you want to know, buy the book!

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BOTANY

Alaska Trees and Shrubs. Second Edition

By L. Viereck, and E. L. Little (with contributions by D. F. Murray and E. L. Little, Jr.). 2007. Snowy Owl Books, University of Alaska Press, Fairbanks, Alaska. 265 pages. US\$24.95. Paper.

Measured in Cranberries, Alaska must be among the wealthiest states in the world. Although this Alaskan hardcopy publication was printed in China, it was produced with major U.S. governmental support. A long-awaited second edition, its underlying data exist elsewhere in digital geo-referenced format online. For some of the most abundant Alaskan species (willows, over 37 *Salix* species occur in Alaska) the authors present text that simplifies relevant details and identifications.

These complex details are all part of Alaska's wild reality and a management that is mainly oriented on commercial goals. The lack of a GAP project in Alaska (otherwise found throughout all states within the U.S.; see <http://gapanalysis.nbii.gov/portal/server.pt>) leaves it a large and harmful heritage; e.g., lack of relevant biodiversity management information and digital administrative culture. At least the digital data from this book are available in an older GIS format (ArcGIS 9.0 + Metadata) at the Bonanza Creek LTER website (<http://www.lter.uaf.edu>) raising hopes of great things to come in the future. This matters a lot, because as the book outlines: "An increasing number of people look to Alaska for wilderness that is no longer present in the more developed areas of the world". It therefore represents a global natural resource leadership issue and role model on how we deal and publish on Alaska's biodiversity and wilderness management components that are so crucial to business and human welfare of the global village.

Together with contributions by D. F. Murray and G. W. Argus, the authors summarize in this book (first edition published in 1972) their life-time achievement presenting up-to-date information on over 14 tree and 115 shrub species. The book offers four identification

keys (Key to Alaska Trees and Tall Shrubs Based Mainly on Leaves, Winter Key to Deciduous Trees and Tall Shrubs of Alaska, Key to Genera of Alaska Shrubs, Winter Key to Alaska Shrubs). For each of the 132 species, distribution maps, a descriptive text (usually covering leaves, twigs, bark, wood, flowers, capsules, hybrids, habitat, distribution, uses and notes), paintings and photos (44 color plates overall) are presented. I enjoyed the numerous drawings (mostly taken from Forest Service publications). The plant distribution maps present traditional-style, expert-drawn "polygon monsters" with mathematically exact shapes and margins but are unlikely to represent biological reality or relevant landscape gradients. Some of the general species text information one might find in other botanical key references. However, readers interested in Alaska will appreciate the many species details provided. For instance "Alaska Athabascans eat the fruits raw or cooked in moose fat" (for Silverberry), or "Alaska Indians used the wood for totem poles, dugout canoes, and houses, and made mats, baskets, and ropes from the stringy bark" (for Western Red Cedar).

The reader of this book will appreciate the incredible diversity (and abundance) of willows, birches, and berries (e.g., Blueberry, Bearberry, Cranberry, Huckleberry, Snowberry) in Alaska. But environmental problems, widely cited in geo-botanical publications, such as climate change, endemic species loss, road impacts, overcutting, nitrogen input and general human footprint found throughout Alaska are sparsely treated). Oil development, or pipeline impacts, key features in Alaska's landscape and recent history, and discussed almost worldwide with high-profile books devoted to this issue (see for instance National Research Council of the National Academies 2003), are hardly even mentioned.

The authors maintain a dubious and ecologically non-sensitive view that "...the distribution of trees and shrubs have changed little" since the 1970s. However,