

MISCELLANEOUS

Gilbert White: A Biography of the Author of *The Natural History of Selborne*

By Richard Mabey. University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville. 2006. 239 pages. U.S.\$16.50 Paper.

In his introduction, Mabey admits that, at his first reading of Gilbert White's *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*, he could barely cope "with its rambling disorder." Only on visiting Selborne in person did Mabey change his view decisively. I marvel, as Mabey did, that White "could produce something so wholly original and appealing out of such unpromising ingredients."

In this Whitbread Prize-winning biography, the painstaking research of Mabey – whom the *Times* has called 'Britain's foremost nature writer' – results in a remarkably detailed account of the life of Gilbert White. Born in the tiny village of Selborne, White obtained his university education in theology at Oriel College, Oxford, beginning in 1739. Here he met John Mulso, in the year behind him. Although "constitutionally lazy and hypochondriacal," Mulso's life-long correspondence to and from White became a major source for Mabey. Perhaps it was equally providential that White was not particularly successful in his first three appointments to curacies at a distance from his home. When he returned to Selborne he began, somewhat inauspiciously, to commit his nature observations to paper in 1756.

White was patient and inquisitive. His early description in 1761 of the life of crickets was both "vivid and sensuous." In 1767 he began writing to the naturalist and author, Thomas Pennant; two years later he began

his original observations that helped prove that birds migrate. In 1774, White's lively letters to Sir Daines Barrington included one about house martins, which Barrington read to a meeting of the Royal Society. The result was publication of these "models of lucidity and insight" in Britain's earliest scientific journal, *Philosophical Transactions*.

Finally, late in 1788, at age 68, White had the satisfaction of seeing his book in print. He died in June 1793, a month short of his 73rd birthday, modestly unaware of the prominence his book would achieve in the centuries to come. Second and third editions did not appear until 1802 and 1813, respectively, but there have been more than two hundred subsequent editions, one of the most published books in the English language.

I appreciated Mabey's delightful biography all the more because I, too, have visited Selborne. By learning more about Gilbert White, we can better appreciate White's impact on all subsequent nature writing. I congratulate the University of Virginia Press for making this inexpensive reprint, first published in hard cover in 1986, readily available to North Americans. I heartily recommend it to anyone with the slightest interest in English literature or the history of natural history.

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A Paddler's Guide to Quetico and Beyond

By Kevin Callan. 2007. The Boston Mills Press, Erin, Ontario Canada. 192 pages. U.S.\$24.95 Paper.

It's the dead of winter on a Friday evening when friends lay out the maps on the floor in front of a burning fire. Over wine, possible routes are discussed and commitments are made for a canoe trip six months hence into one of the most intact, accessible and largest protected wilderness areas in North America: Quetico Provincial Park. This is a book that will lead you beyond your usual canoe routes; in fact, it may inspire you to plan a trip celebrating Quetico's 100th anniversary in 2009!

Kevin Callan is no stranger to writing books on wilderness canoeing with seven "Paddler's Guides" for Ontario canoe routes to his name. Kevin reminds us that there is a great story to be told after every canoe trip we make, as a result of spending quality time with a group of family or friends on a journey through the natural world of wind, water, wildlife and plants, complete with portages, bannock and fireside stories. Each of the sixteen canoe routes described in this book is a well-written informative story, weaving important prac-

tical information such as the take-out and put-in spots for portages, special sites to see, and danger spots – into historical accounts of those who were here long before our forays using Kevlar canoes and Gortex. The stories also convey the hardships and joys shared by the group traveling with Kevin; the "real stuff" that makes canoe trips memorable.

The book does not overwhelm the reader with unnecessary detail on the gear to bring, what kind of canoe paddle is better than another, etc., rightly assuming someone heading to Quetico is not a novice. At the same time, simple, straightforward descriptions of canoe routes make them immensely doable for the average paddler. Exceptional pictures and tidy maps are also included, with references for the "proper" maps a canoeist must purchase in order to undertake these trips.

Sixteen canoe routes are described in *Quetico and Beyond*; eleven in Quetico Park and five within neighboring areas of northern Ontario. Most routes require about one week to complete, although some are as short as 2-4 days and others as long as 28 days. Summaries provided for each of the canoe routes includes

number of days required to complete the route, the number of portages, the longest portage, route difficulty, access points, and the maps needed. Scanning the summaries provides a quick method to narrow down which routes look the most interesting within the time frame and abilities of the group.

Quetico is a book that provides very readable pleasant conversation that, in a personal way, brings canoe-

ing to life through its past and more recent adventures. The many reminders of the subtle rewards of canoeing that are conveyed provide a real enticement to begin planning your next trip.

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More than Kin and Less than Kind: The Evolution of Family Conflict

By Douglas W. Mock. 2004. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA. 267 pages. U.S.\$27.95.

If you wish to understand how complicated and how variable reproductive behaviours can be, this is the book! Doug Mock offers a wide vista of nature in all its infinite variability and complexity. To explain bird behaviour, Mock invokes human examples, as diverse as his three older brothers, chess, Wall Street, sports teams, and vote counting.

Mock offers creative chapter headings and begins each chapter with a brilliant quotation. He simplifies difficult-to-understand concepts in an instructive and often entertaining manner. As he says, this book is a "mixture of theory and data." He is especially interested in brood size and in siblicide. I will offer a few highlights, some of which mention Canadian research.

Mock attempts to explain both the "hows" and "whys" of concepts that include Darwinian fitness, evolutionary game theory, inclusive fitness theory, evolutionarily stable strategy, parent-offspring conflict, parental manipulation, optimal clutch size, replacement offspring, and the insurance egg hypothesis.

Reproduction is costly. When Collared Flycatcher broods were enlarged artificially, there were fewer breeding adults the following season, and when two eggs were removed, females laid larger clutches the following year. Seychelles Warblers produced 77% male chicks in poor habitat and 88% female chicks in good habitat.

Lifetime monogamy is uncommon among birds but there are notable exceptions. A sample of 919 pairs of Bewick's Swans showed not a single divorce, but if a mate died the survivor would re-pair. From a sample of over 6 000 banded birds, 99.6% of Barnacle Goose pairs were socially monogamous.

Mock discusses Hamilton's rule, promulgated in 1964, whereby "two full siblings should be the evolutionary equivalent of one Self" – or eight cousins – based on the amount of shared genetic material. Altruistic behaviour, such as nest helpers, relates to the mix of relatedness.

What happens in nature often seems counter-intuitive if not outright bizarre. Biologists have difficulty understanding, much less explaining, such events. What conceivable evolutionary advantage could result from a surplus egg or surplus young? Why do some species of eagle and pelican regularly lay two eggs, yet raise

only one young? Why does a parent bird passively watch one of its nestlings kill another, even when surplus food is within reach? Why does a hawk nestling sometimes eat its sibling after killing it, but on other occasions does not?

At Delta Marsh, Manitoba, Spencer Sealy videotaped nests with a single cowbird and a single warbler; the cowbird out-hustled, out-begged and out-stretched its warbler nestmate. In British Columbia, Bruce Lyon studied American Coots, which lose some chicks to starvation in nearly half the broods. Adult coots make a point of getting more food to the youngest, but when Lyon clipped the bright ornamental plumage of the tiny chicks, the clipped birds survived less often.

The late Roger Evans of the University of Manitoba did experiments to study the role of the extra or "insurance" egg in the American White Pelican. He and his student Kevin Cash carefully marked the first-hatching or A egg, and the second-hatching or B egg. Twenty percent of the B eggs hatched. The parent pelican would brood its young, but as soon as the parent stood up, the older young attacked its smaller sibling.

Wahlberg's Eagle, which ranges across central Africa, lays a single egg; not more than three percent of pairs lay a second egg and then the larger chick regularly kills the smaller one.

The Verraux's (Black) Eagle lays two eggs, but an observed first chick began assaulting the second chick soon after it hatched, giving 1 569 blows with its beak to kill its sibling, even though food was plentiful in the nest. The Crested Penguin lays two eggs, but the first egg is up to 40 percent smaller; four days later the second, larger egg is laid and is given the optimal brood patch position beneath the mother, and is usually the sole survivor.

Mock does not restrict himself to birds. He writes about plants, insects and fish, using the firefly as an example of signalling. He tells how, in a pig litter, anterior teats produce more milk than posterior teats, hence the colloquialism, "sucking hind teat."

As Marlene Zuk says on the dust cover, this book about family conflict "is a model of how behavioral ecology can and should be done ... Just don't take it to family reunions."

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