

BOOK REVIEW

The Peacocks of Baboquivari. Erma J. Fisk. 1983. W.W.Norton & Company, 284 pages, \$15.

The title of this book would lead you to believe that the story takes place in an exotic foreign land. And it does occur in a locale exotic for eastern birders - high in a mountain range in southwestern Arizona. Erma (Jonnie) Fisk was sent there by the Nature Conservancy to record the wildlife of the area for one winter and spring. The peacocks had been imported by the original owner of the ranch and turned out to be a detriment to her work. "A flock of peacocks, for Pete's sake!"

The Nature Conservancy chose an unusual and well-qualified person to document the birdlife by banding and field observation. Widowed, restless and lonely, Jonnie Fisk was free to take on the task, and her background is enviable, though she puts herself down. "Damn, damn, they have sent a girl to do a man's job." But, she tells us, "I have parlayed my backyard fun into a serious avocation." She was in her forties when she began her birdwatching, got a banding license, and started a new career. (We don't need to be told that she comes from a family of workaholics.) Interspersed with telling us about her experience in Arizona, we get glimpses of her work in Florida, on the east coast to protect the nesting Least Terns (for ten years), at the Laboratory of Ornithology at Cornell, in Ecuador, Honduras, Belize, Trinidad and Tobago, for example. Elected to many boards, Mrs. Fisk says she falls asleep at meetings, that she is a field person, not a policy person, and has built her new life around field ornithology. Among her many accomplishments, she translated Maria Koepcke's Las Aves del Departamento de Lima, Peru. There is in this book the pleasure of reading about persons and places familiar to birders as well as a strong conservation message throughout.

The setting for her simple cabin at 4,500 feet was magnificent, with the rocky tower of Baboquivari dominating. The road, however, was a rough track, and it was the coldest winter on record, with constant rain, even snow and hail. She had to backpack in her supplies much of the time for two miles from her van, and three times was isolated by impassable fords. There were people who checked on her well-being, but she was mostly alone, in semiwilderness. "My presence is obviously a surprise to every visitor. On some days it is to me too."

The peacocks ran off the small birds, there was no shade for the nets, and even in spring she felt the ranch was too high for migrants. In her words, "There is not enough birding to make an honest woman of me," or "My birds are mostly juncos, damn it." At times, she ran eleven nets all day and was lucky to get four or five species, mostly repeats. She is frank with her problems of identifying sparrows and Empidonaxes. One evening, she has to cut an oriole out of the net, because

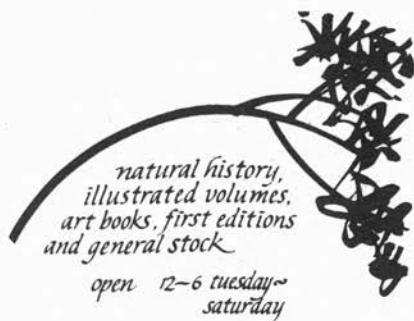
she can't see to untangle it, an act of of absolutely last resort for a bander of her experience. But perhaps the saddest time for her was when the rancher's wife hosed down the Say's Phoebe's nest with eggs, that she had been watching for weeks. "Where are those phoebes, grieving as I grieve tonight?" In contrast, is her description of the Hooded and Scott's orioles singing vespers in the fig tree. "As their duet continues it becomes for me a distillation of all the clarity and beauty of spring in this remote canyon."

Jonnie Fisk deals with her disappointments, her loneliness, her physical handicaps and age (she is in her seventies) in a down-to-earth, honest way, and always with humor. The picture she paints of the area and the details of her life there are absorbing, as are the vignettes of her family and friends. Her personal courage is remarkable.

In spite of not having caught any unusual birds, she admits she has enjoyed the winter even though, "I have abandoned hope of listing new birds for the area and sending down reports to excite my sponsors, of making some small reputation in ornithology for myself." Readers will know she already had such a reputation and has added to it with this very personal book. This is an adventure story from which there is much to learn. When it is time to leave, she writes that the Least Terns are flying north from South America, and she must return to Cape Cod. Jonnie Fisk has more work to do. The debt is ours.

Proceeds from this book go to the Nature Conservancy.

Patricia N. Fox, Lexington



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