

BOOK REVIEW: *ON WATCHING BIRDS*

by William E. Davis, Jr.

On Watching Birds by Lawrence Kilham, illustrated by Jean Waltermire, foreword by John K. Terres; Chelsea Green Publishing Company, Chelsea, Vermont, 1988; 187 pages; \$9.95 (paperback).

Over the past few decades scores of books have been published which have "bird watching" or "watching birds" in their titles: *Watching Birds: An Introduction to Ornithology* (Roger F. Pasquier), *A Guide to Bird Watching* (Joseph J. Hickey), and *Watching Sea Birds* (Richard Perry), to name but a few. Many bird watching books deal mainly with sport birding, listing, or bird identification, but some encourage the reader to extend their interest in birds into the realm of bird behavior and other aspects of bird biology. The three books mentioned above are in this tradition, and so is *On Watching Birds*, by Lawrence Kilham.

This autobiographical book is about behavior watching, principally bird behavior, but also the behavior of mammals and other animal groups. Kilham began watching birds when he was fourteen years old, but after partaking of the competitive sport of birding with its "Big Day" emphasis, decided that he was more interested in the solitude of a cabin in New Hampshire's White Mountains. There he could enjoy nature in a quiet way and, with careful watching, perhaps discover something new. The chapters of this book present a sampling from his lifetime of behavior watching, the anecdotes liberally salted with philosophy and quotes from past and present nature watchers. Kilham strongly believes that great satisfaction can be derived from sitting in one place and learning about bird behavior in depth. He always prefers to be unobtrusive in his watching and never, for example, has banded birds. He suggests that it is best to learn about a bird first hand and then read about it. Kilham finds little value in the "...chart-and-table-studded articles on behavior in the leading journals of today." His taste is for good old-fashioned natural history.

An entire chapter is devoted to the old adage, "Chance favors the prepared mind," and Kilham suggests that discoveries do not have to be big to be exciting. He argues that behavior watching can be as exciting as chasing rarities and is motivated by the same impulse. Opportunism plays a major role in behavior watching, and Kilham favors watching whatever birds are local and easy to observe. The reader may find his linking bird watching to John Locke's searches after truth a bit quaint, but Kilham makes the point that watching birds should be something special, something that opens new horizons.

The book is divided into twelve chapters which follow, somewhat chronologically, Kilham's behavior watching exploits. The first chapter traces the development of his interests through his medical school days, and the second

chronicles his first serious behavior watching efforts. The latter included observations on the distraction displays of a Worm-eating Warbler, the attack on a Ring-necked Duck by a Pied-billed Grebe from underwater, and the nesting behavior of a pair of Black and White Casqued Hornbills in East Africa. Chapter Three deals with Kilham's woodpecker behavior watching (a topic on which he has published extensively), and Chapter Five focuses on watching birds in Central America (Chapter Four is an interlude in the bird watching sagas entitled, "Reading for Ideas and Inspiration"). Subsequent chapters include behavior watching of willets, oystercatchers, a Whimbrel, Snowy Egrets, Sandhill Cranes, kingfishers, and crows (about which he has also published extensively). Chapter Nine discusses behavior watching opportunities throughout the year in New Hampshire.

In the final chapter, "Instinct for Beauty and Love of Animals," Kilham expresses his philosophy of nature and concludes:

What I like best about behavior-watching . . . is that it not only strengthens my bonds with the beauty of nature, but also my empathy with living things . . . Merging with nature for the time that one is absorbed in watching some bird or animal is a way of hanging onto the fundamental self that, in many people, seems in danger of extinction.

Some may find this a bit sentimental, but I think it clearly suggests that behavior watching may provide new satisfactions and insights into the world around us which are both exciting and meaningful. If you can accept the numerous quotations from people such as Oliver Wendell Holmes, quotations that I found unnecessary and a little irritating, and a tone that belittles modern-day practices, the book is a delight to read. Kilham writes well and is obviously a very experienced and keen observer of nature. If you are a behavior watcher you will love this book. If you are not, you probably ought to read it anyway. It may stimulate some new interests and in the long run increase the pleasure you get from birds.

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