



Books For Banders

"SOMETHING OLD AND SOMETHING NEW"

Edited By Mabel Gillespie

This year, as previously announced, has been devoted to a survey of Life History studies. However, it is often difficult to decide where the Life History category ends and the Behavior category begins. We're going to go all out for Behavior in 1967. More professionally speaking, this is the science of Ethology which is very young. Robert Ardrey, to whom you will soon be introduced, claims that Ethology is "going to be more fun than a barrel of argumentative monkeys."

Our faithful contributor, Michael Thomas, presents brief reviews of two recent publications. The first is a life history of a whole species, a species whose continuing life practically a whole nation is hoping and trying to save.

The second book is by the author of "Argen the Gull," which was included in this department in the last issue. This author has also written "Watchers at the Pond." In his final paragraph Mr. Thomas hints at the human analogy to the life pattern of birds. It is planned to pursue further this startling similarity between Homo sapiens and members of the avian world. Such analogy comes wrapped up in presentations of avian behavior studies, and you may be surprised and shocked. It may be a dizzy adventure, so fasten your seat belts and brace yourselves for jet streams.

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Two books have come my way in the past few months that have shed light on the nature of man more than they do on the world of ornithology. Nevertheless, I think both books will be read with fascination by members of the banding fraternity.

The first is Faith McNulty's "The Whooping Crane" (Dutton, \$4.95). Drawing heavily on the pioneer work of Robert Porter Allen, Miss McNulty has produced a book that surely outdoes most whodunits for holding one's interest 'til the mystery is solved on the last page. In this case the mystery is unsolved, for at this moment in time the future of the Whooping Crane is precarious, the outcome of future attempts to raise a stock in captivity and release them, yet unknown. In reading the book, one is very depressed by the contribution human frailty (and bureaucracy) have made to the reduction of the Whooping Crane population. I speak not only of the hunters and their lobby, whose myopia is understandable, but of vacillation in the Department of the Interior, indeed in the Fish and Wildlife Service itself, in the record of the many confrontations between officialdom and the Curator of the New Orleans Audubon Zoo, in

the relations between Interior and the Defense Department. That our general concern with (and current self-righteousness about) conservation has a long way to go is certainly underlined by this book, the villain of which is Homo Sapiens. Too little and too late may be the verdict when the Whooping Crane is added to the list of extinct birds in perhaps as little as ten years. If we save the species, it will be by the skin of our teeth. The book's great value is in dramatizing the struggle of birds in a hostile environment, hostile because of the predations of man. Each of us is probably living close to such a struggle, be it for open space in a city, for funds for natural history education among young people. The loss of an acre or two in a city may not be as dramatic as the loss of the Whooping Crane, but in its own microcosm, just as tragic. The book leaves one with a determination that the follies of the past should not be repeated. Let us hope not.

The other book is less directly about birds and man, rather it is an introspective view of man himself, placed in the context of all creatures' struggle for existence in a hostile world. The book "The Secret Islands" is by Franklin Russel, whose books "Watchers at the Pond" and "Argen the Gull" may already be known to readers. The book is the saga, and I use the word intentionally, of Russel's visits to the remote islands of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, particularly to those off the coast of Newfoundland. Whilst Faith McNulty's book leaves one depressed with one's own species, Russel's perhaps puts matters in perspective, for here is a picture of homo sapiens as but one of thousands of species fighting the elements for his own existence. The primitive nature of his struggle is thrown into focus by Russel's description of the lives of Newfoundland fishermen. Russel is a fine writer, and his description of his visit to Funk Island is haunting. Funk is the breeding home of a million murrelets, and Russel's reaction to it is startling, for what he describes is by analogy the human predicament: "Death is nothing. Life is nothing. Chaos is order. Order is a mystery. Time is meaningless. The deep throated roar of the colony cries out to a heedless sky." The result of Russel's visits to these islands was a heightened awareness of himself. That is, the opportunity given to those who share our interests in natural history, for in seeking a greater understanding of the world of nature we are surely also understanding ourselves. The Secret Islands is published by W. W. Norton at \$5.95.

- Michael J. Thomas

Your editor would like to end the current book section with mention of two magazine articles. In Natural History for March, 1966, appears the title "How a Bird Tells the Time of Day," authored by John D. Palmer. Dr. Palmer's research specialty is the study of biological rhythms in algae, crabs, and birds. He is assistant professor of Biology at New York University, and a researcher at Woods Hole Marine Biological Laboratories. I hope the following whets your curiosity.

"Because biological rhythms are so universally distributed throughout the kingdom of living things, they should probably be recognized as a

fundamental property of life itself....The ability of birds (and most other organisms) to 'tell time'...has puzzled biologists since the first experiment was made in 1729." (Can someone tell us what this experiment was and by whom it was undertaken?) "This enigmatic mechanism is popularly called the 'biological clock.'"

"Careful studies have shown that each spring 75% of the robins in the United States return to within a five mile radius of their northern home of the previous year (about the same precision as our Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles)."

There is a brief discussion of the experiments of Dr. Gustave Kramer, and his theories of avian orientation which is called "bicoordinate navigation," and which is described as the "time-compensated nature of sun orientation.....A bird, in order to maintain a constant direction of orientation, had continually to make allowance for the sun's changing positions."

"The overt rhythmicity of so many biological processes establishes its presence, but after well over 200 years of inquiry, its place of residence and its driving force remain elusive."

The issue of Yankee for Sept., 1966, contains an article by Jean George titled "How to Read Bird." In other words, don't take for granted the premise that you understand what a bird is up to from superficial observations. The author tells how the English were urged to study the small birds that were opening milk bottles and stealing the cream. "Obviously they (the birds) were teaching and learning; for, since 1921 when it (cream stealing) was first noticed in a small town...in southern England, it had spread into London and northward to Scotland, Ireland, and Wales." The culprits were blue and great tits, both of which species stay in one area all their lives. How, then, did the art of opening milk bottles slowly spread throughout the British Isles? Here was a unique sort of a whodunit which was eventually solved by James Fisher.

The author mentions other discoveries of avian behavior gained by the spreading pastime of "reading" bird. Obviously banders should add to their routines of banding, weighing, measuring, etc., a "reading" of what a bird is actually doing. I'm sure most of us attempt to do this.

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