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BOOK REVIEWS—RESEÑAS DE LIBROS—RESENHAS DE LIVROS

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Moments of Discovery: Natural History Narratives from Mexico and Central America. — Edited by Kevin Winker. 2010. Univ. Press of Florida, Gainesville, Florida. 402 pp. ISBN 978-0-8130-3417-1. Costs $75.00.

Each year scores of scientists travel to Mexico and Central America (also called Middle America) to explore the region's geography, natural history, and ecology. Some are senior scientists with many trips to their credit, while others travel the region for the first time. Among these scientist-explorers, ornithologists have been in the vanguard: witness the massive literature on the systematics, geographic distribution, behavior, and ecology of Middle American birds. But scientific papers convey neither the fun and hard work, nor the funny and sometimes dangerous events punctuating such trips. *Moments of Discovery* is designed to capture "some of the wonderment and history of biological exploration" in the region "through autobiographical accounts by those who have been there" (p. xi).

Twenty chapters recount the adventures of ornithologists from the 1930s (John Emlen, Jr.; Charles Sibley), 1940s (Dwain Warner; Lula Coffey; Earnest Edwards; Joe Marshall, Jr.; Paul Martin; Walter Dalquest), 1950s (Robert Dickerman, Joyce Heck, Don Owen-Lewis), 1960s (Walter Thurber), 1970s (Robert Anderle, Paul Haemig, John Rappole, Stephen Eaton), 1980s (John Bates, Kevin Winker), and 1990s (A. Townsend Peterson). Eighteen of the twenty chapters were written by men. The two exceptions describe Joyce Heck's experience while completing a master of science degree based on work in Tamaulipas, Mexico, and Lula Coffey's travel adventures with her husband Ben Coffey. Although the Coffeys were amateurs, they are widely recognized for substantive contributions to Middle American ornithology, including studies of nocturnal birds, swifts, and bird sounds. A brief paragraph by the editor introduces each storyteller and the context of his or her work. Because the contributors were encouraged to write about their experiences, we learn about them and about many of the leading lights of twentieth-century American ornithology whom they encountered during their careers. Even baseball's Babe Ruth makes a cameo appearance. Reading these accounts reminds readers of past adventures or lets them live vicariously through those adventures.

Most of the writers were professional ornithologists. Walter Thurber, an exception, was in El Salvador to foster science education on a U.S. State Department assignment. He spent many years in the region and, along with his wife Amanda, raised El Salvadorans' appreciation of their natural world. Mexican biologist, naturalist, and conservationist Miquel Álvarez del Toro wrote the book's

only chapter by a citizen of the region. Happily, the region's citizens have added much in recent decades, as scientists, environmental activists, and avid birders. Perhaps future accounts will include more of their experiences.

Field tales of Mexico dominate this volume, with sixteen chapters exclusively or largely about that country; brief descriptions of fieldwork in Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Panama occupy a dozen pages or so. Two chapters describe experiences in El Salvador, one in Belize, and one on a 1970 drive through Mexico and Central America to Panama. The extensive fieldwork in much of Central America, such as Panama, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua, during the twentieth century is, unfortunately, underrepresented in this compilation.

As evoked by the stories in this book, biological exploration seems to share a consistent array of experiences: excitement of discovery, hardships and dangers of field research in remote areas, friendliness of people in local communities, and importance of conserving a region's natural heritage. Robert Anderle writes of the "richly satisfying days in this wild land," and laments that "there may be few or no such wild places in the Tuxtla Mountains to experience again" (p. 33). In a chapter titled "Lost in the Tuxtlas," John Rappole describes an unwisely taken cross-country trek. Lost in the forest after dark with no light and unable to see even his compass, Rappole came across a little girl carrying an oil can with a lighted wick; she took his hand and guided him to her village. This "first experience with poor country folk," taught him that they "tend to accept people as they are, ... they are the warmest, best people in the world" (p. 266). He also notes that most field biologists view difficulties merely as distractions. Washed-out roads, flooded rivers, mechanical problems with vehicles, loss of direction in cross-country travel, and other perils are just part of the job. Unlike Indiana Jones, field biologists may have adventures, but "we just don't have the dash that goes with the legend" (p. 262). Stephen Eaton's drive to Panama in 1970 reminded me of my own drive on that same route two years earlier (1968). His birding adventures, trials with customs agents and border crossings, and the condition of roads echo my own experiences during research travel around the globe.

Collecting specimens was the goal for many bird researchers, especially in the early decades. The success of a search for the Horned Guan (*Oreophasis derbianus*) depended on "taking careful aim - because the success or failure of the trip could depend on that difficult shot" (Álvarez del Toro, p. 10). Or "The single specimen [of a Harpy Eagle, *Harpia harpyja*] I shot is probably the only one from Veracruz [Mexico] in scientific collections, and there are probably none left alive in the state" (Dalquest, p. 75). In a few cases, the chapter authors begin their stories with the trip from their home institutions (e.g., Minnesota, Cornell, Berkeley) as they traverse the United States enroute to Mexico, including how they "often shot birds from the road and picked up road kills" (Sibley, p. 274) as they crossed states. How times have changed! Such activities today would require a mist net full of permits. Paul Martin speaks of the "adrenaline rush familiar to all hunters, including bird collectors," attributing it to "genetically rooted hominid behaviors" (p. 221). Perhaps thankfully, however, collecting specimens is not as dominant an ornithological activity in the twenty-first century. For one thing, the technology now available in modern digital cameras makes high-quality photographs relatively easy to obtain. Documenting bird observations is vastly easier today than just a few decades ago, obviating the need to collect a specimen to support each observation of a range extension,

for example. Moreover, ornithologists are increasingly focusing on ecological and behavioral research, in part because of the firm foundation already available in many museum collections.

Scientific collections have contributed to ornithology in many important ways, including development of the high-quality field guides now available for countries throughout Middle America. Of his early trips, John Emlen writes (p. 146): "With no identification guides and no list of likely encounters, we were constantly perplexed and challenged by strange sounds and strange forms flashing across our visual fields." Indeed, when I arrived in Panama in 1967, my only recourse for bird identification was to describe what I saw to two scientists with vast experience in Panama (Neal Smith and Ed Willis); they speeded my learning during a time when no comprehensive field guide was available. The addition of, among others, *Birds of Panama* (Ridgely 1976, 1989, 1993) and *Birds of Costa Rica* (Stiles *et al.* 1989) forever changed the landscape of bird identification in the region. Avid birders and scientists alike continue to enrich our understanding of the birds of Middle America: roughly 100 species have been added to the Panama list (now at more than 970 species, Angehr *et al.* 2008) since the first edition of Ridgely's book was published in 1976. The foundation for those advances was established by the collections made during those early biological explorations of Mexico and Middle America.

Ornithological collections have contributed in other key ways as well (see recent review by Winker *et al.* 2010). They provide the foundations for important studies of biodiversity, incidence of disease, genetic relationships, contaminant levels, and so on and serve as sources for education, outreach, and exhibitions. But collecting must now be done with greater sensitivity to local context and law. Whether collecting is done by scientists or by, as I experienced in central Panama, a Boy Scout troop doing survival exercises, it can be devastating to long-term field research - not to mention the collected species. If not legally and sensitively done, collecting can give both scientists and field research a bad name.

Sadly, the reality of declining bird populations throughout the region is another recurring theme, largely because of habitat destruction and hunting by local citizens trying to feed their families. As Walter Dalquest remarks, "the existence of a bird or mammal will depend on its value as meat, and will be compared to the cost of a shotgun shell used to shoot it. My specimens and notes may soon be the only evidence that some species of birds and mammals ever lived on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec" (Dalquest, p. 82). The capture of birds to satisfy the demand for exotic pets continues to put pressure on bird populations.

Finally, a literature-cited section provides source material for readers interested in the science driving the expeditions, mention of species (bird or otherwise) in the text is accompanied by the species' scientific names, and many photos of people and places offer visual punch. At $75.00, this book is perhaps too expensive for most personal libraries, but if your institutional library has a copy, take time to read *Moments of Discovery,* whether you are planning your first trip or have already been on many trips of your own. Overall, the editor is to be congratulated for his effort to give the researchers an opportunity to describe their experiences. Maybe not Darwin's voyage on *HMS Beagle* or Lewis and Clark's trek across North America, these writers' travels make compelling reading nonetheless. — James R. Karr, Professor Emeritus, Univ. of Washington, Seattle, Washington. Current address: 190 Cascadia Loop, Sequim, WA 98382-6704, USA. *E-mail:* jrkarr@u.washington.edu

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