

Natural History Essays Book Talk

by Elizabeth Barker

Great Possessions by David Kline (1989)

David Kline is an old order Amish farmer who lives in northeastern Ohio and is the editor of Farming magazine. Wendell Berry's foreword describes him as being informed by reverence for the natural world and its stewardship which forms a union of economy and ecology. He is a man who gets a living through physical work but has not denied himself an active mental life. Kline's own introduction emphasizes that the Amish place great importance on community and have chosen not to be controlled by modern technology. Small scale farming with horses both embodies and reinforces the value of personal interaction with the land and one's neighbors. His comment on the value of horses not having headlights is indicative of a wry sense of humor. He is more likely to quote Pliny - or Wendell Berry - than the USDA.

The chapters have been written over a period of time, often focus on a specific topic and are arranged in an appropriate seasonal order beginning with winter. Ernest Thompson Seton viewed animal tracks as the first writing. Those who enjoyed Eileen Sawyer's tracking talk will be reminded of her "what happened here" track pictures. Birds are a winter highlight, both those that stay and those, like the snow bunting that make an early trip north. (Several years ago Jim McCormac's article about the lingering flock just south of Ashley - outlined by the snowy fields and well-fed by the householders - brought out of state visitors.)

Kline's own observations include finding ice fishing bait in the golden rod galls, noting that maple trees growing in the open have higher sugar content sap, felt-filtering the syrup removes malic acid, male phalaropes incubate the eggs while the females flaunt brightly colored feathers, and great horned owls lay their eggs in early February. Digging sassafras roots for spring tonic tea discloses the information that possibly it was that early blooming tree that Columbus smelled. The sassafras is the farthest north growing member of a tropical species and was used by Florida Indians to cure the ague. Peepers say "too deep" and bullfrogs advise "go 'round".

The Killbuck River wetlands are compared to Virginia's Great Dismal Swamp which Washington called a paradise - as opposed to Audubon's disillusionment at first viewing the Everglades - similar to John Muir's response to seeing Walden Pond. Kline quotes biblical Ezra to describe metamorphosis: When I heard this thing, I rent my garment and my mantle and plucked the hairs from my head and my beard I was so astonished.

Such an openness to the natural environment and contentment in his way of life is particularly illustrated in a chapter describing a walk he and a young daughter take. Two of the older girls have dropped then off along the road on their buggy trip to Berlin. They plan to catch the bus

home from Millersburg. When they realize they will miss that connection, they shrug, go on their leisurely way, indulge in ice cream and are able to contact a friend who drives them home. Kline provides a well-informed, enjoyable natural history read and an appreciative look at a way of life that may seem contrary and primitive to some.

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek by Annie Dillard (1974)

Tinker Creek is located in the Blue Ridge Mountains close to what was Annie Dillard's home. This book is a journal-like account of her ramblings and ruminations in that environment. There's a reasonable amount of wildlife information and sometimes overly ecstatic enthusing about the beauties of nature and the nurturing of the soul. The great charm of the book, however, is the innocent delight of getting up in the morning or going out in the night to see what is happening and to be aware. It's like taking a curious child for a walk in the woods, one who asks questions that make you see - and then ponder.

She sees a frog deflate before her eyes as its innards are dissolved and sucked up by a giant water bug. She lurks on the bridge in the evening, waiting to surprise the elusive muskrat rippling its way home. She walks up the mountain to a vantage point to see the starlings merge into a roosting colony and settle invisibly into the bare branched trees. She watches a cocoon bring forth a writhing mass of parasitic wasp larva.

She observes that, surely, insects are proof that nature will try anything and it's amazing that their bizarre complex adaptations actually succeed.

Saving Jemima: Life and Love with a Hard-luck Jay by Julie Zickefoose (2019)

An 11 day old rescued blue jay's life through fall migration is lovingly, and very anxiously, recounted by a southern Ohio naturalist in 250 pages. The book is lavishly illustrated with watercolors by the author and photographs. Even the end papers are blue jay egg colored. It is also an interesting look at the business and personal life of the author. Searching for contemporary books on natural history was reminder enough that it's a niche area. Long before Covid, Zickefoose didn't get publisher financed book tours. She bought boxes of her works and scheduled her talks with garden clubs. An opening introduction notes that aspect of her life. A concluding chapter more frankly talks of her own imminent empty nest and divorce. It's illustrative, perhaps, of the human ecosystem that exists beside the natural one being portrayed - and how the two interact.

That is pertinent from the beginning as one of the original concerns about raising such a young corvid bird is imprinting. Zickefoose has a following and is frequently contacted by people in relation to "the fallen baby bird". She also frequently works with the Ohio Wildlife Center which has "no bunny-hugging" care routines. She arranges to have the bird brought to her. It would still need to be fed every couple of hours and she (doesn't everyone?) has live mealworms and

nestling formula. She is later quite able to take a sickly, hoped for companion jay out into the woods and wring its neck. Still, with a teenage daughter really in need of diversion and a cute baby bird in need of constant care, there are hazards. So Jemima (no naming!) stays and grows, vocalizing to pop music and pounding the dog - and seemingly thriving.

Early in June Jemima is released, but very well provided for and somewhat hovered over. (I think Joy Adamson had similar qualms with her lion cub.) A literal banquet - chicken breasts, pork roast, pine nuts, etc. - is provided in a casement window station. She appears to sufficiently fear natural predators. She's been socialized through those first days in the nest and regular exposure to videos and birds outside the window. She even finds a friend. Maybelline was named for extra black feathers around the eyes but the blue jay habit of males feeding females later seems to undo his presumed sex, and confirm Jemima's.

Problems occurred earlier when Jemima became ill and was diagnosed with house finch disease. Treatment consists of 3 weeks of antibiotics which is not easy with a free flying bird, - but was successful. It may have been responsible for Jemima's original abandonment and did affect her first flight feathers. Zickefoose is encouraged about Jemima's fortitude as she recalls a regular blue jay visitor with an injured leg. On the happier side is Jemima's feature bit in PBS Nature's Sex, Lies and Butterflies program.

Jemima and Maybelline migrate in the fall. Zickefoose involves herself in photographing blue jays to establish individually identifying features. She outlines jay development and pointers on attracting them. A year and a half later she sees two very familiar birds in the returning flock.

The Rural Life by Verlyn Klinkenborg (2003)

Klinkenborg is a writer who keeps horses and lives on a small farm in upstate New York. His early years were spent on an Iowa farm and he frequently visits Wyoming and other points west. The book is a seasonally arranged collection of essays written for The New Yorker. Both the time and the locale vary throughout. The subject is primarily thoughtful observations on natural history and rural life. His introduction alludes to the idea of keeping a journal - like Thoreau's Walden. Would that I could keep a journal like this. The observations are descriptive, poetic, laced with charming metaphors. There are some facts about horses and the weather and a few connections to holidays and events. Mostly the little catalyst around which these pearls are formed is some rather ordinary occurrence such as driving in the snow, feeling that the season is changing, or building a chicken coop. There's not much to summarize and it's difficult to quote. I can enthuse and I can recommend that it replace the "Bible in the motel room" or that you take one chapter at bedtime for a peaceful night's sleep.

It's Raining Frogs and Fishes: Four Seasons of Natural Phenomena and Oddities of the Sky by Jerry Dennis with drawings by Glenn Wolff (1992)

The introduction gave the picture of two amateur naturalists wanting to explain the workings of the world to young children. I expected something lighter and more conversational. This is a Wikipedia like summary of facts and interesting statistics, focusing on the atmosphere and the water cycle, and seasonally arranged in relation to the probability of occurrence. There are a few noticeably out-of-date references such as the note that space debris is expected to double by 2010. It's a handy adult reference, suitable for interpretation, strewn with interesting asides, and enhanced with folklore, mythological, and literary comments.

There are facts that might be worthwhile to memorize or note. Spring moves north about 100 miles a week. The full moon rises in the east as the sun sets and does so about 50 minutes later each night. A blue moon occurs only every 27 years. Due to the heat retention of water, coastal breezes are "in by day, out by night". Psychological and physical reactions to pending rain may be related to the air's ion balance. Positive ions encourage serotonin production and depression, negative ions after the rain enhance well-being - and are claimed to cause chickens to lay more eggs. Those ions also have something to do with lightning and the thunder produced by the electrical explosion. Count the seconds between them and divide by 5 for the storm's distance in miles.

There's a section on eclipses in case you want to prepare for the anticipated 2024 local event. Midsummer Night's Eve has both good and bad interpretations. It's John the Baptist's birth date and the witches sabbath. Rainbows share similar qualities - plus the elusive one of the pot of gold. The portion above the horizon depends upon the height of the viewer. There are moonbows, and ghostly fog bows. The sun does stand still visually as it hovers 3-4 days at its northern point on the horizon before beginning the journey south. On any clear dark night, which is almost a theoretical concept anymore, there are half a dozen visible meteors. But the meteorite in the Yucatan blamed for the dinosaur extinction may have been an above the earth explosion of comet debris - as was the 1908 Siberian event.

The winds sweep across a mythological range and scatter almost as many names for significant locals as the Eskimos have for snow. They made use of 34 ton iron meteorite for knives and spear points. The Viking northerners may have been lured towards North America by mirages though a recent review of a book about human migration certainly gives humans credit for deliberate navigation through a variety of means. Also in recent news was a mirage of an upside down ship in the sky. On and on the facts and explanations continue. There's plenty of information here to explain to children why it's more probable to see meteors on a cold night. There are also answers for adults who may have wondered why explorers didn't try skiing to the South Pole.

My Side of the Mountain by Jean Craighead George (1959)

This, along with Gary Paulsen's Hatchet, is the classic survival in the wilderness story. A New

York City boy sets out in May for family owned land in the Catskills. He has a penknife, a ball of cord, an ax, \$40, and recently purchased flint and steel. He's spent a lot of time in the library learning how to live in the woods. He burns and chops a home for himself in a huge tree trunk. He captures and trains a falcon. He smokes venison and tans hide for clothing from hunters' wounded escapees. He is befriended by a librarian in the nearest town and a vacationing teacher roaming the mountains. His "wild boy" presence becomes a news item. Within a couple of years he welcomes the arrival of the rest of the family which comes to join him.

The essentials are accurate, the survival feasible, and the act has surely been the daydream of many a young person. (The river journeys talk elicited the loan of Englishman Jonathan Raban's *Old Glory*, a journal of his trip down the Mississippi River in a 16' motorboat, inspired by reading *Huck Finn* as a boy.) Wondering how many would actually survive (either) isn't the point. It's a good read for any age and just the idea of the possibility of finding edibles in the wild or being able to camp out overnight makes the effort worthwhile. Reading it aloud to a young person envisioning those possibilities would be - priceless!