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# NATURE LIBRARY

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## BIRDS WORTH WATCHING

GEORGE MIKSCH SUTTON. 1986. University of Oklahoma Press, Publishing Division of the University, Norman. Forward by Olin Sewall Pettingill, Jr. 207 pp., 60 color photos. Hardcover \$

This book is a tribute to George Sutton's keen eye for detail and his enjoyment in bird watching. His meticulous note-keeping made it possible for the book to be completed some years after his death in 1982. Sutton's love for birds and their importance to us all is made very clear by his writings. He describes the joy he felt in 1901, at the age of three, when being entertained by a Ruffed Grouse drumming on the window sill of his family's cabin near Aitkin, Minnesota. Truly an amazing age to start "watching" birds.

The book consists of accounts of 60 bird species, each accompanied by a photograph. These species represent 12 major groups or orders. Some of these species are well known in our part of Canada, while others are indigenous to the southern United States. Many of us will only dream of seeing some of these southern species, but through his vivid descriptions, Sutton brings them a little closer to us all. Not only does the author relate his own intimate contact with these birds in the Oklahoma area, but he also describes the birds' courtship, nesting, molting, migratory patterns and general behavior so we can understand more about the species. It is obvious that the author has a great deal of knowledge of bird behavior. He does not hesitate, however, to end each of his species accounts with a question about some aspect of the bird's life, expressing the need for more studies of individual bird species. For example, Sutton asks some questions

regarding the Brown-headed Cowbird that possibly many of us have also asked: "How did social parasitism come to pass? Was the ancestral cowbird orthodox in its nesting?"

The photographs are of very high quality. Taken by several different photographers, they not only depict the bird in its natural habitat but also show some behavior characteristic of that particular species.

While reading this book I could not help comparing George Sutton to a well-known Saskatchewan bird watcher, the late Manley Callin. Many of Sutton's detailed bird observations were made during his trips to and from his work at the University of Oklahoma. Callin also made many of his observations while travelling to and from work. In the forward to Sutton's book Olin Sewall Pettingill Jr. describes Sutton's perceptions as being infectious, sharpening his own senses. George Sutton influenced his many students at the University of Oklahoma, just as Manley Callin influenced me and others of his friends. The detail I saw in Callin's note-keeping helps me to understand George Sutton's attention to detail.

I recommend *Birds Worth Watching* to anyone who is interested in bird observation. It is an excellent reflection of the personality of Sutton and is a good introduction to his 14 other books. My only criticism of this book is that there are accounts of only 60 species. I am sure Sutton had a difficult time selecting these species and that he believed that all birds are "worth watching." — Reviewed by *Don Weidl*, Box 607, Birch Hills, Saskatchewan. S0J 0G0

# MAMMALS IN NORTH AMERICA

## Wildlife Adventures Stories and Technical Guide

Robert E. Wrigley. Wildlife Paintings by Dwayne Harty 1986. 21 x 28 cm. Hyperion Press Ltd., Winnipeg. 360 pp.

Have you ever wondered if beavers get hit by falling trees, if squirrels lose their footing, or how porcupines copulate? Dr. Wrigley may not answer all your questions about mammals, but he does present some fascinating information in this readable, descriptive volume. For example he tells us that "The arctic fox makes the most extensive journeys of any land mammal in the whole world." In reference to the Cougar he says: "The cat is capable of incredible physical feats, covering 13.7 m (45 ft.) in one bound, leaping 5.5 m (18 ft.) into a tree, and 3.7 m (12.1 ft.) vertically while carrying a deer carcass in its jaws." He shares this about the Masked Shrew: "A heart rate up to 1,200 beats per minute has been recorded."

This book deals with 115 species of mammals in an attractive format. The introduction to the book gives the reader a brief overview of the world biomes, accompanied by maps and illustrations. I do not know upon what basis they were chosen, but several animals represent each biome. After a general forward for each of the 11 biomes, a short story tells what daily life, at any given time of the year, is like for these warm-blooded creatures. An adjacent page of small print offers technical data: the common and scientific names, the family and order, length and weight, colour, distribution and status, food, and reproduction and growth. All measures are in imperial and metric. The remarks at the end add an interesting personal touch so that you do not get the feeling that you are reading a textbook. The end of the book has a well-

designed checklist of North American mammals, followed by an extensive "Additional Reading" list.

Along with the data, there are large well defined maps showing the distribution of each mammal. Occasionally there is confusion as one tries to match up the text information with the map. The maps could have also offered migration routes or areas of population densities.

I found myself always wanting to read the story first and the fact sheet later. The story usually left me hungry to know more, such as this last line: "The famed population explosion of lemmings had begun, and the whole tundra community of plants and animals would be affected." In each story there was good interconnection with other animals mentioned in the book. In a story about the arctic hare, for example, we read: "A lone white arctic wolf, who had gone without eating for three weeks, caught the hares' scent from over a kilometre away."

There is no dead time in this book. Every sentence contributes not only to knowledge about a particular animal, but also to the understanding of the cycle of life. "Later its soft tissues provided food for an arctic fox and insects. The following summers the mountain avens grew stronger and produced dozens of flowers, fertilized by the last remains of the wolverine." This ability to see nature as a whole is part of Wrigley's strength, and he alternates the use of minute detail with his articulation of general concepts.

Ninety-eight full-page paintings create a book that appeals to a wide age range and level of interest. Ironically, the verbal descriptions are so good that some of the pictures are lifeless in comparison, for example the paintings of the White Whale, Pronghorn and River Otter. However several paintings enhance the word pictures and give a strong feeling for the habitat. These include the Sperm Whale, Western Harvest Mouse and

Striped Skunk. When Wrigley says about Mountain Sheep: "These stocky animals are heavy but sure-footed, with independently moveable sections of the hoof, each backed by a rubbery pad and a scent gland in between," I long to see a small line drawing of it to help me understand this. At other times I want to see tracks or close-ups of unique features. Such illustrations would have been an asset. Unfortunately too, colour often reproduces poorly and reproductions are always different from the originals in colour and texture. If you compare the Ringtail that graces the cover, with the Ring-tail inside, you will find some discrepancy.

*Mammals in North America* can be easily understood by the lay person, and may serve as a stepping stone to deeper study. The scientist will find it a good quick reference. It is written concisely while still allowing for personality. The paintings are accurate, fairly charming and sometimes even exciting. It is not "yet another book" as I first thought. It is special because as the author states, it has "entered the daily lives of animals." — Reviewed by *Colleen Gerwing*, 3-510 11th Street East, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. S7N 0G2

## HAMILTON MACK LAING, HUNTER-NATURALIST

RICHARD MACKIE. 1985. Sono Nis Press, 1745 Blanshard St., Victoria, B.C. 234 pp. Hardcover. \$19.95.

Mack Laing became a hunter at the age of 11 in 1894 on a pioneer farm at Clearsprings, Manitoba. Unlike many other boys, he learned the habits of the birds and mammals he snared, trapped and shot. After attending collegiate in Winnipeg, he took four months of teacher's training and at age 17 began six years of teaching in rural schools. He commenced a nature diary that year and learned taxidermy.

In 1908, after another year at normal school, he became principal of the school in Oak Lake. Here he started one of the first boy scout troops in Canada; the late Dr. D.A.D. Wright of Nipawin was one of his pupils and scouts. Spare time was spent in nature study. His book, *Out with the Birds*, was published in New York in 1913; a reviewer for the *New York Nation* called this an "uncommonly good book." In June 1911 he gave up teaching and enrolled in a four-year art course at the Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York.

Every summer he returned to his camp at Oak Lake. In spite of his art training (reproductions in this book show that he achieved competence), Laing eked out his living by writing for magazines such as *Recreation*, *Sunset*, and *Canadian Magazine*. After serving a year in the Royal Flying Corps, Laing turned to newspapers and published about 150 articles in the *Toronto Globe* and over 400 in the *Manitoba Free Press*, although two were published in *Scientific American*.

In 1920, he accompanied Francis Harper and Alden Loring on a seven-month Smithsonian collecting expedition, canoeing down the Athabasca River from Fort McMurray to Lake Athabasca. His second collecting experience in Saskatchewan followed the next year when he accompanied P.A. Taverner to Cypress Lake and Eastend before going on to his old stamping grounds at Oak Lake, Manitoba. In 1922 he was assistant ornithologist with the National Museum of Canada's field party in the Okanagan Valley and at Comox on Vancouver Island. In October 1922 he bought a five-acre lot near Comox where he and Taverner had camped all summer, and spent a year clearing the land and building his house. In 1924 he was naturalist with the *HMCS Thiepval* expedition to Japan. In 1925 he was naturalist on the Canadian Alpine Club's Mount Logan expedition.

After an 11-year courtship and a five-year engagement, Laing married in 1927

and brought his bride from Oregon. The two of them turned his lot into the Bay Brook Nut Farm and Market Garden, though he supplemented his income as a freelance writer and summer collector for museums.

In 1930 he was the first Canadian park naturalist ever hired, working at both Jasper and Banff National Parks. That summer his wife Ethel was hired as a cook and his student assistant was Ian McTaggart Cowan. When the depression in 1931 abolished the naturalist position, the Laings lived on the proceeds of their fruit trees and 866 nut trees.

In the summer of 1934 he collected on Vancouver Island with a Carnegie Museum party led by George Miksch Sutton and John B. Semple. From 1935 through 1939 he again collected for the National Museum in British Columbia, training Charles Guiguet from Shaunavon, Saskatchewan, who later became curator at the British Columbia Provincial Museum. Thousands of Laing's specimens of birds, mammals and plants remain in our museums. One plant, (*Antennaria laingii*), a subspecies of the Marsh Wren (*Cistothorus palustris laingi*) and a Pocket Mouse (*Perognathus parvus laingi*) were named for Laing. He was also one of the first to be concerned with what is now called acid rain, writing about the "blight of the poison gas from the Trail Smelter that has killed and left the blanched skeleton of the forest at its feet." As a new generation of naturalists grew up who used binoculars and field guides instead of the gun, Laing's views on predators became outdated and earned him more enemies than friends. Although he ceased writing articles, his fine biography of his friend Alan Brooks, who shared his philosophy, was published by the British Columbia Provincial Museum when Laing was 96 years old. Manuscripts for 13 other books remain unpublished. Laing remained hale and hearty, gardening and writing long, interesting letters when in his 90s. He died as he was about to enter his

100th year. We are in debt to Richard Mackie for his careful research, reviewing and listing large numbers of unpublished archival letters and manuscripts. Clearly not an ornithologist himself, and not fully cognizant of Laing's contemporaries, particularly Ernest Thompson Seton, Mackie has made only a few errors of fact and interpretation, as well as several omissions. For example, I wish Mackie had pinpointed the site of Clearsprings (two miles north of present Steinbach, Manitoba), and had given the exact dates of Laing's birth and death, both of which occurred in February.

This worthwhile and readable book is illustrated by a fine collection of 65 photos and 14 of Laing's paintings and is reasonably priced. It helps one to appreciate a pioneer naturalist who made important collections in Saskatchewan and southwestern Manitoba. — Reviewed by *C. Stuart Houston*, 863 University Drive, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 0J8.

## THE MULBERRY TREE

ANNA FRIESEN and VICTOR CARL FRIESEN. 1985. Queenston House Publishing Co. Ltd. Winnipeg, Manitoba. 206 pp., softcover \$9.95, hardcover \$19.95.

As Victor Friesen has pointed out this book is a "pioneer reminiscence," but nature plays an integral role in the development of Anna, the main character, from childhood to adolescence. The title indicates the book's ties to the natural world, as do the section headings: "A Twig is Bent," "Green Leaves and Yellow," "The Branches are Bare" and "Blossoms." References are made throughout the book to the changing seasons, as well as the various flora and fauna associated with each season.

The setting is near Rosthern, Saskatchewan (North West Territories at that

time) in the early part of the twentieth century. The book chronicles the early life of Anna Friesen, Victor's mother, and her family, who homesteaded in the Rosthern area. It is at once an account of and tribute to his Mennonite heritage and the sturdy pioneers it bred.

Anna was the first of her parents' children born in Canada, after they left Minnesota for the North West Territories and the homestead opportunities they offered. Because of her status as their first Canadian-born daughter, Anna was a special source of pride to her parents, particularly her father, who was characterized as a robust adventurer who "became an adult with mixed feelings." Her mother on the other hand, was the solid foundation on which the family was built, quietly enduring years of hardship, endless toil and childbearing and rearing. Indeed, her mother emerges as the true heroine of this book; her role was that of the typically unsung Mennonite mother and housewife, without whom few pioneer families could survive.

The story is a nostalgic look at Anna Friesen's past and the difficult, though rewarding years in a harsh climate and on sometimes uncooperative soil. As an outdoorsman, Anna's father chose a farm with a lake; since it was chosen in winter, he could have no idea that by spring his prized lake would become an alkaline slough. Told with a good deal of acceptance and good humour, Anna's story is one of the triumph of a family's love and willingness to work together over difficulties such as poverty, cramped quarters, back-breaking labour and the omnipotent weather.

Included in the book is a recipe section

which provides instructions for several traditional (and delicious!) Mennonite dishes. In addition, an entire chapter is devoted to the foods prepared and enjoyed by the Mennonite pioneers. Central to their survival was the ability to use what they had at hand — wild fruits, abundant garden vegetables, milk and cream. Much of a pioneer woman's time was devoted to the preparation of food, for without sustenance, hard work, the foundation stone of this province, became impossible.

Their lives, like their foods, were simple; their basic needs were satisfied and they asked for little else. Without our modern conveniences, life revolved around the changing seasons - the passing of yet another impossible winter to a spring ripe with the promise of plentiful harvest; golden hot summers which give way to the hubbub of the harvest.

This book's triumph is the analogy of the mulberry tree's growth with the progress of Anna and her family. The continual reference to the mulberry bush, her father's fond memory of his former home in Minnesota, parallels the healthy growth of a new family in a new land.

This is a simple, refreshing account of one woman's childhood prairie experience. It is an experience shared, however, by many and for that reason it holds a historical significance for those of us with roots in Saskatchewan. This is also my own grandmother's story in that it is a common reminiscence of a robust rustic life. Bad memories have been set aside and what shines through is the courage and unfailing determination of a hard-working, contented people. — Reviewed by *Terry Toews*, Box 607, Birch Hills, Saskatchewan. S0J 0G0