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THE LOON - VOICE OF THE WILDERNESS

JOAN DUNNING. 1986. Yankee Publ. Inc., N.H. Forward by Robert J. Lurtsema 143 pp., line-drawings, colour plates. Hardcover \$21.95

If all else about *The Loon* were to fade from my memory one impression would prove indelible. That is the insight *The Loon* has provided me into the meanings within the bird's vocal repertoire. Or at least as close as humans can yet come to truly understanding the messages in another species' voice. I had not really appreciated how threatening the mere presence of a boatload of people can be to a pair of nesting loons. I have been just as "lost in the magic [of the loon's tremolo], unable to believe the beauty of this rite of spring. The loons' cries of alarm, of desperation sound like laughter to human ears, like the essence of nature and joy and well-being . . . [people] have no sense of intrusion, any more than they would feel that they intruded on the stars or the aurora borealis. How could they know. . . . The loons speak another language . . . the sounds bear no resemblance to a plea." Author - artist Joan Dunning lets readers into the intimate lives of loons through writing inspired by years of loving observation of the birds. With few exceptions, she has done so without abandoning a sense for the "science" of the loon.

This is not a textbook to consult for the capsulated points on loon biology. It is not a reference work including data on loon ecology or behavior. Dunning's facts, however, are well-founded and the details for which science is so hungry are there.

It is through her excellent interpretive natural history that they are revealed to the reader.

The book's preface clearly sets out that the subject is *Gavia immer*, the Common Loon, "the loon that has most often captured people's imaginations and whose fate is most intertwined with man's. The personal tale of a loon grounded, and later the fatal victim of a west coast oil-spill helps express the author's commitment to the birds and sets the premise for her study and writing. From here she takes the often travelled "a year in the life of" road with the loons' story, but does it so well I wasn't once let down. From winter on the ocean through the four seasons Joan Dunning shares the life of a pair of breeding loons and their offspring. It is not told with strained sentimentality, nor does it become folksy. One of her most interesting observations pertains to the timing of loons' nesting and its relative success or failure in relation to the disturbance of "loon lakes" by human recreational users: "It is just a chance occurrence of our calender, some mismatch of our needs and loons', that Memorial Day and the Fourth of July fall when they do. A pair of loons that loses a clutch of eggs" . . . [to human disturbance from motor boats, etc.]. . . "in the frenzy of the Memorial Day weekend will frequently lay new eggs approximately ten days to two weeks later . . . Thus by the weekend of the Fourth of July, when extra-large crowds of vacationers again converge on the lakes, these new eggs have been incubated . . . just a week short of the twenty-nine necessary to fully form the embryos . . ." For more northerly Canadian lakes incubation begins slightly later and we can easily substitute the Victoria Day and July First

weekends for the American holidays. Thus we find that Dunning's observation might generally hold true for boreal forest loons of our country. The section on the year of the loon concludes with a poignant comment on western societies' "inability to get ahold of ourselves." The message is most powerful; I'll leave it to the reader to discover on his own.

Part II briefly covers the history of the loon, putting its length into perspective by asking us to picture loons nesting at the edge of a lake visited by "*Brontotherium*, a double-horned, eight-foot North American rhinoceros, or *Orohippus*, a little sixteen-inch relative of the horse." The appendix contains information adapted from the excellent record album "Voices of the Loon," by William Barklow. The author's fine narrative style and content is complemented by her talented illustration with pen and ink drawings and water

colour paintings. Both are in perfect character with the writing and bring much to the mood of this book.

The Loon is not a reference text to be consulted for the facts alone. Although the facts are there you benefit more by reading the entire book to discover them. Dunning communicates her love for loons and her conscience for taking care of this earth with a prose that submerges and surfaces as effortlessly as her subject. The only difference is that while loons leave no ripples, this author manages to send gentle waves of thought and concern regarding the future of the loon and humankind to the reader. I suggest you give *The Loon* the opportunity to float its knowledge and insight to you through its pages. Then listen across a loon-lake one spring evening. — Reviewed by *Bradley Muir*, Box 212, Waskesiu Lake, Saskatchewan. SOJ 2YO



Common Loon

Wayne Shiels/Four Winds Prairie Photography

THE LOVELY AND THE WILD

LOUISE DE KIRILINE LAWRENCE. 1987. Natural Heritage/Natural History Inc. Toronto, Ontario. 228 pp. Illustrated by Glen Loates. \$12.95

Originally published in 1968 by McGraw Hill Ryerson, this book is one of a series by Dr. Louise Lawrence being reprinted in soft covers by Natural Heritage. This is a laudable service, for these works have long been out of print. The excellence of *The lovely and the wild* was recognized in 1969 when Louise received the John Burroughs Medal for nature writers. There is something more than good writing in this book, some intuitive grasp of the relationship between mankind and nature. No living writer has a better understanding of the lives of wild birds, and it is birds that are the main subject of this book. Budding naturalists, not sure of their field of interest, will find here a tempting world; experienced nature lovers will find an affirmation of many of their deepest feelings; ornithology students will come away with insights on ways to observe, perceive and record bird behavior.

It is fitting that this capable author — now 94 — should be the quintessential naturalist; largely self-taught and with no academic background (she received an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Literature in 1970 from Laurentian University), she went on to become the first Canadian woman awarded Elective Membership in the American Ornithologists' Union. In this book we see Louise Lawrence in her early years as a naturalist, finding inspiration in the natural surroundings of a home in the boreal forest in the Shield region of Ontario. We benefit from sharing in her exploration of the natural world and the gradual development of her capabilities. She writes:

"I know of no occupation so fulfilling as that of being a watcher. The observing self is pushed into the background, almost obliterated except for a cramped leg or an aching muscle imposed by enforced immobility. The present is dominated by the natural stage and all senses are focused upon the amazing events that are constantly taking place. Sensations and sounds arrange themselves into orderly sequences of action, revealing, mystifying, spectacular in meaning and consequence."

This fine book is illustrated by 36 line drawings by Glen Loates. There are 8 landscape or plant sketches, 7 of mammals and 21 of birds. Loates' illustrations are quick and sensitive, just like real birds.

This is the kind of book that one can open at any page and begin reading. Try this, selected at random:

"The sound of wild alarm cries startles me. Quick as thought the warblers dash for cover low down near the ground under the thick shelter of bracken and sarsaparilla, neither heeding nor fearing the proximity of me and my feet. The assault comes fast as lightning. The dark shadow streaks past the corner of my right eye, and I do not fully realize what is happening until I see the sharp-shinned hawk land on the rounded boulder . . . For a moment the hawk remains sitting where it landed, its deep orange eye surveying the surroundings, a proud denizen of the forest pursuing its legitimate prey."

Get a copy of *The lovely and the wild* — read it, and then pass it on to some other deserving person. — Reviewed by Robert W. Nero, Wildlife Branch, Box 14, 1495 St. James St., Winnipeg, Manitoba. R3H 0W9