

## **BIRD NOTES by Rick Pyeritz**

*In his essay on the wilderness, Aldo Leopold wrote: “Only those able to see the pageant of evolution can be expected to value its theater, the wilderness, or its outstanding achievement, the grizzly.”*

### **Skutch’s response to Leopold’s quote follows:**

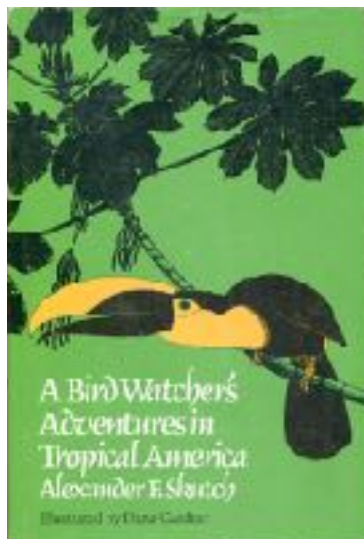
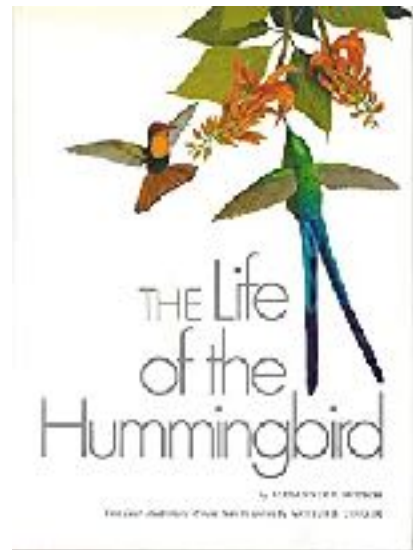
“To me, this is misplaced admiration. The common habit of applying the epithet “noble” to the biggest, most powerful, and usually most predatory birds and quadrupeds is vulgar and thoughtless. Lions, grizzly bears, and similar animals, especially the males that are the larger sex and, therefore, presumably the most “noble,” are commonly selfless and surly --- miserable parents who do little or nothing for their offspring.

Many a small, weak animal is a far more outstanding or admirable achievement of evolution than these big brutes, by any criterion that we many choose for judging them, except weight and strength. Compared to a small bird, especially a passerine, the grizzly, the lion, or the eagle, is a crude creation. The small bird can do many more things---build a beautiful nest, sing enchantingly, if a migrant finds its way over vast distances; it is more pacific, a good parent, and often has a pleasing social life.

And it does all this with an exceedingly small fraction of the material and energy that the huge animal needs for survival, it makes much smaller demands upon its environment.

The bird is to the grizzly bear as a fine watch is to a stone crusher. And many another animal, among mammals, fishes, and insects, is a more outstanding achievement of evolution than the grizzly. When will man outgrow that primitive mentality---one of the chief causes his disasters---- that adulate power, whether in the form of a callous, egoistic military leader like Alexander of Macedonia or Napoleon Bonaparte or a huge predatory animal like the lion or the grizzly bear? Perfection is most often found in little things; our planet, the falsest in the solar system, is tiny as celestial bodies

go.”



***Skutch continues with this theme and introduces his belief that aesthetics and the appreciation of beauty plays an important role in the evolution of species.***

“Is it only an accident that these creatures which have achieved the most harmonious relations with vegetation, as with the rest of the living world, include such a high proportion of the animal kingdom’s most beautiful members?

Tanagers, Birds of Paradise, Fruit Pigeons, Manakins, Hummingbirds, the mainly frugivorous Trogons, Brush-Tongued Lories, Butterflies---what a brilliant galaxy! Must not the harmony of their existence be somehow related to their visual beauty? Compare their splendor with the dull or dingy coloration of the most highly prized predatory birds and mammals, the hawks, owls and terrestrial carnivores.”

Skutch viewed nature as a harmonious association of species living together with predation as a destructive force. A life-long vegetarian he avoided disturbing wildlife in any way except for snakes which preyed upon his beloved birds.

“While filling Earth with life, evolution covered it with beauty. Not the least of its precious gifts to us is our capacity to perceive beauty, not only in the living world but also in the inorganic world that supports it and the heavens that surround it, and to be refreshed and uplifted by this vision. Nothing so swiftly excites our admiration and appreciation as beauty.”

If you would like to read more about Skutch’s thoughts on the origin and continuing evolution of life on Earth I would suggest Skutch’s book, *Life Ascending*, University of Texas Press, 1985.



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