

For Love of Insects

By Thomas Eisner. 2003. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 448 pages. Paper.

I remember well being almost overcome with wafts of formic acid after breaking apart an old black spruce stump during a stroll in the forests of eastern Newfoundland. At the time I figured that I was the victim of an ant species of the subfamily Formicinae, ants that Eisner describes as “spray gun(s) on legs.” Such ants, each containing a formic acid gland, can eject a fluid that may exceed 50 percent formic acid. Put hundreds of such ants together in one spruce stump and the chemical barrage can be overwhelming.

A self-described “incorrigible entomophile,” Thomas Eisner, Schurman Professor of Chemical Ecology at Cornell University, has written a feast of a book. In astonishing detail and delight, he describes a host of insects and arthropods and the myriad ways in which different species have evolved sophisticated chemically-based means of predation, protection, mating, and a host of other interactions among insects or between insects and plants.

Eisner’s early passion for the natural history of insects combined with his interest in natural chemistry led to his pioneering advances in the chemical ecology of insects and arthropods. Chemical ecology came to be his life-long passion as he delved into the secret lives of insects mediated by a host of chemical signals. The beginnings of potential research projects were often formulated during his favourite walks in nature, particularly in the southern and southwestern United States. These initial observations often led to further sophisticated chemical studies on the identity and mechanism

of the chemical basis of insect behaviour.

The book is a feast of stories about insects and their wonderfully adaptive chemicals that allow them to live and survive what is obviously a precarious existence. Each story is adorned with fascinating photos (many from the adept hands of Eisner himself) of a world seldom seen or appreciated by most of us.

These stories of insects and their chemical ecology are wonders and gems in themselves. Of equal or even greater delight, is the sense of wonder and love communicated by Eisner throughout the book’s pages. By self admission, the study of nature for this naturalist explorer can never disappoint him. His passion is infectious. His stories are peppered with the joy and exhilaration of research and discovery. The reader is introduced not simply to facts and explanations, but to a host of graduate students, post-docs, and collaborators, including his wife Maria, who shared the joy and delight of Eisner in his “love of insects.”

Eisner ends his work by noting that without curiosity, without passion for discovery, nature cannot endure. He laments our steady encroachment upon nature, upon the loss of boundaries. He notes, however, that ultimately, curiosity will be sustained – and that we will coexist with the living world. Can love of insects make a difference Eisner wonders? He ends this treasure of a book by admitting that he would like to believe that it does. I could not agree more.

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Rare Bird: Pursuing the Mystery of the Marbled Murrelet

By Maria Mudd-Ruth, 2005. Holtzbrinck Publishers, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10010. 298 pages. US\$16.29.

This well-written environmental history book captures a fascinating story: the Marbled Murrelet, a seabird nesting mostly in trees: one of the greatest environmental failures in the conservation history of globalization, western civilization and North American governmental stewardship. The book states that since 1830 due to logging of the old-growth forest unsustainable activities in the Pacific Northwest has spared only 10% of the historic nesting habitat of the Marbled Murrelet. Other well-documented threats for Marbled Murrelets in this book, are fisheries (gill net by-catch) and oil pollution. That this species is covered by the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA) is a controversial topic because, in areas around Seattle and north of it, it is among the most abundant birds almost year round.

The book reads well and can be recommended to naturalists, arm-chair explorers as well as to conservationists, ornithologists, Marbled Murrelet activists,

and researchers. Its great strength is its documentation of the recent history of Marbled Murrelet research in the United States, in California, Oregon and Washington. Also, an archeological and native view from the Haida and Tlingit tribes is presented, including fascinating stories about specimen and egg collections now distributed world-wide (e.g. in museums of London and Vienna). Accounts of famous explorers and early naturalists in “Marbled Murrelet land” such as Latham, Gmelin, Banks, Pennant, Lever, Cantwell, Dowell and Jewett are included as well.

The text reads like a detective story: The toenail of the Marbled Murrelet is as well covered as the first official nest found in 1974 near San Francisco by H. Foster. Other fascinating details cover a Canadian nest encountered 1953 by W. Feger, how S. Sealy initiated the first Marbled Murrelet studies in North America, and Russian scientist S. Kishchinskii’s theory of juveniles leaving the nest to the remote ocean by simply following a stream. Insights are provided on how the International Council for Bird Preservation accepted Marbled Murrelets as a conservation issue of global