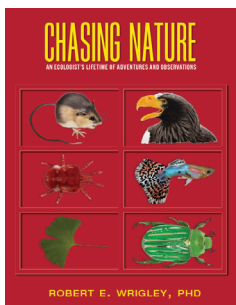


Chasing Nature: An Ecologist's Lifetime of Adventures and Observations

By Robert E. Wrigley. Illustrated by Rob Gillespie. 2020. FriesenPress. 367 pages, 67.49 CAD, Cloth, 53.99 CAD, Paper, 20.99 CAD, E-book. Signed premium copies available from the author (robertwrigley@mymts.net) for 55.00 CAD, Paper, + 17.00 CAD, shipping.

Naturalists have a penchant for writing accounts of their explorations of and enthusiasms for the natural world. Books of collected essays or full-blown autobiographies featuring their years of research are too numerous to mention. Robert Wrigley has developed his own delightful twist, adopting storytelling as a means of relating his life-time avocation and vocation of *Chasing Nature*. Thus, while his book is organized autobiographically, his *Lifetime of Adventures and Observations* is related through 230 stories that begin with his early childhood, when he first discovered his fascination for the natural world, extend through his years of education—high school followed by three degrees in biological fields and associated field work—and continue throughout his career in the museum/zoo world into his years of active retirement. The continuous, connecting thread is a healthy and inexhaustible curiosity about the natural world that goes beyond the living present to encompass the Earth's ancient past and anticipate its anxious future.

The premium copy I reviewed is printed on glossy, letter-sized, sewn-bound paper, with its cover—as you can see—comprised of 14 paintings of specimens noted in the book by artist Autumn Lough. The whimsical humour of friend and cartoonist Rob Gillespie's colourful drawings animates a number of stories; line drawings by the author and friend Todd Lawton and photographs, often by museum volunteer Darlene Stack, complete the 100 or so illustrations. The book is not indexed, but the list of illustrations and the table of contents naming each of the stories make up for this. These lists are preceded by a short foreword and dedication, followed by an introduction and acknowledgements. In his introduction, Wrigley writes about, and thus places himself in, the long history of storytelling, from prehistoric and early historic through to early modern, i.e., 19th century, times, then outlines his lifelong pursuit of “information about Nature” (p. ix). A pair of appendices that provide a List of Common and Scientific Names (pp. 341–349) used in the book and Nature Quotes Through the Ages (pp. 350–360) precede a list of Selected References (pp. 361–365). About 650 names are listed, by my rough count, a real indicator of the



extent and variety of Wrigley's interests beyond his expertise in mammalogy.

The storytelling approach works, for Wrigley's “goal is for this book to stimulate others to go outside and explore Nature, whether in a backyard, park, or an exotic location, and to be receptive to life's diversity, dynamism and lessons” (p. x). This is, of course, exactly what Wrigley has been doing throughout his entire life. He takes an interest in literally everything, and his education and work experience have provided myriad opportunities to satisfy that desire to explore and share his knowledge. He had a lot of practice on the job honing his story-telling skills through creating write-ups for exhibits and press releases, writing 18 previous books and numerous articles—his very first was published in 1969 in *The Canadian Field-Naturalist*—and as Zoological Editor for *The Encyclopedia of Manitoba* (2007, Great Plains Publications).

The stories vary in length from one to five or so pages and are organized around the major events of the author's life, although the chronology within each chapter can be as flexible as the topics. The constant thread is a curiosity-driven search for insights into nature wherever he finds it. As related in Chapter 1, Youth Days (1943–61), Wrigley's memories date from his years as a child in Buenos Aries, Argentina, where he became “fascinated by the natural world as soon as I could walk” (p. 3). The family moved to Quebec when he was about six, and he spent the kind of boyhood there that is increasingly unavailable—roving the out of doors. He had the good fortune of having very tolerant parents and an excellent high school biology teacher, and so his unrestricted curiosity took him to nine years of University Days (1961–1970) that involved adventures in Cape Cod, Maine, and field work experience in the Canadian North, collecting degrees—and many mammals—along the way at McGill University and the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

Chapters 3–5 cover, respectively, his years as a first director of the Manitoba Museum of Natural History, 1970–1988; director of the new Oak Hammock Marsh Interpretive Centre, 1989–1995; and curator of Winnipeg's Assiniboine Park Zoo, 1996–2012. Along with the many natural history accounts of a stunning variety of animals and plants, we get behind-the-scenes tours of museum and zoo operations from an insider who enjoyed his work a great deal. Throughout, Wrigley was, and still is, an avid collec-

tor and contributor to various provincial and national collections, both those in which he worked and others around the world. Museums and zoos are often the best, if not the only, places that the public can see firsthand a broad diversity of species and learn about their habitats, life histories, and the tremendous threats under which human activities have placed them. We may have mixed feelings about animals in captivity for the infotainment of the masses, but at times these are the only viable populations left, or the only way to enhance genetic diversity in decreasing stocks in the wild. Wrigley's adventures and resulting stories continue apace throughout Chapter 6, *Retired Days* (2013–2020), as now he can follow his own lead, exploring and reminiscing as the spirit moves him, and fully indulging a renewed interest in entomology.

Conservation and the fate of life on earth become increasingly strong themes throughout the book, finally given free rein in Chapter 7, *Last Thoughts*.

Chasing Nature has taken us from the innocence of happy childhood explorations through the pleasures and challenges of adult activities, but now the tone shifts to Wrigley's increasing concerns about climate change, habitat destruction, escalating loss of biodiversity, human over-population, and crises of health that affect us all. A book which has demonstrated the richness of the life of one man engaged in the pursuit of nature now becomes a solemn overview of life on earth from its most remote beginnings to its ultimate end in a very distant future. There is a reason his book is dedicated to LUCA, "all current and extinct species' Last Universal Common Ancestor" (p. vii)! His concluding question is also a challenge: "Are our instincts and intelligence too primitive to act collectively to save our species and our home?" (p. 338).

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