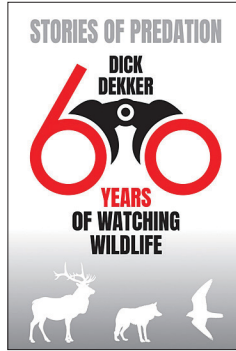


ZOOLOGY

Stories of Predation: 60 Years of Watching Wildlife

By Dick Dekker. 2021. Hancock House Publishing. 240 pages, 34.95 CAD, Cloth, 19.95 CAD, Paper.

Dick Dekker is a remarkable individual, and *Stories of Predation* is a remarkable book. Dekker is a largely self-taught “independent naturalist”, but unlike thousands of other birders and wildlife watchers, he has taken it upon himself to carefully collect, analyze, and synthesize his many endless observations. He tells us that “the first science paper I had ever read ... opened my eyes to what could be done by just watching hawks in the field” (p. 210), and that his “methods were simple and required no more than patience and luck to be in the right place at the right time” (p. 61). Dick Dekker is not just a hobbyist; he is a researcher, and this book is a summary of his studies. I have to admit: such things fascinate me.



The tagline, *60 Years of Watching Wildlife*, gives away the fact that this is actually an autobiography, summarizing Dekker’s accomplishments over the years. On page 209, he can’t resist letting us know that this was his original choice for the book’s title. Still, this volume is indeed about predators, mostly, and there are plenty of well-told stories here about wolves, falcons, and eagles. But the book also contains reflections on the natural history of shorebirds, ungulates, forests, and water levels and, on another level, it chronicles Dekker’s opinions on various aspects of park management (and mismanagement), conservation, experiences in the backcountry, and life as a Dutch immigrant to Canada.

It is important to realize that in many ways, Dick Dekker’s perspective is singular. He is unlike a university academic, or a government biologist, or a typical environmental journalist. However, he now holds a Ph.D., awarded by the University of Wageningen in the Netherlands, where they invited him to submit a thesis based on his falcon studies. In 2009, at age 75, he became the oldest person ever to receive a doctorate from that institution.

So what does an “independent naturalist” do for 60 years, free of the shifting research priorities of government, and the grant politics and publication pressures experienced by university academics? Well, for one thing, Dekker publishes extensively in

specialist venues tightly appropriate to his work (e.g., the *Journal of Raptor Research* and *Waterbirds*). He has also been a regular contributor to *The Canadian Field-Naturalist*. One gets the impression that to him, all publications should be considered equally important, refereed or not, local or international. I agree, at least in principle, and I wish that universities shared this view.

Do I have anything to criticize about this book? Well, I could nit-pick about various aspects of Dekker’s ecological worldview, and point out some misspelled scientific names, but these concerns do not diminish my approval of the book. I did, however, find it curious that Dekker mentions all of the people he agrees with by name, but treats his rivals and detractors anonymously. This comes across as gentlemanly, but it also makes one want to uncover the identities of the anonymous bad guys.

He does seem to have some valid complaints about some of his colleagues, though. For example, on pages 54 and 55, we learn that the ecological dynamics involving Elk, wolves, and aspen trees were first elucidated by Dekker in Jasper National Park, and published in the *Alberta Naturalist*, only to be seen and then reworked in Yellowstone by professional scientists, who failed to credit Dekker’s original studies.

Twice in the book (pp. 97, 201), Dekker bemoans the fact that scientists are not always objective and fair, and credits none other than David Suzuki for this insight. What a contrast to life in the academic sphere, where one continually encounters scepticism regarding the objectivity of science, with Suzuki as a frequent target of such criticisms. In a world where scientists are typically considered guilty of bias and spin, until proven innocent, it is refreshing to encounter Dekker’s somewhat old-fashioned ideals, and his genuine desire to remain objective and dispassionate.

Perhaps Dekker’s sense of etiquette is also the reason that it is rather difficult to identify many of his major conclusions. For example, he seems convinced that the oil and gas industry is reducing water levels in Central Alberta lakes, but he mentions it only as an aside. Even after reading the book cover to cover, I still had to go back to figure out what “the Peregrine’s paradox” was all about and, despite an entire chapter on the subject, I’m still not clear what the adaptive value of melanism is for wolves (but I can guess, from the title of one of Dekker’s co-authored papers).

When you read the works of professional scientists, the conclusions are almost too bold, but with Dekker, they take some sleuthing to uncover.

Dekker's scientific style makes sense when one considers his overall approach. In a world where most biological studies take place over one or two "field seasons", using tightly-focussed "hypothesis testing", Dekker's datasets were amassed over decades, and he is relentlessly inductive, mulling over thousands of observations before tentatively suggesting a general explanation for what he has seen. When it comes to statistics, he keeps it simple, using only sums, means, and the occasional linear regression, performed by his brother, "a mathematician". Jumping to conclusions is simply not Dekker's style.

Stories of Predation is as close as we can get to an independent, carefully researched perspective on the topics addressed in this book. As such, it should be right there on the bookshelf of anyone interested in the natural history of Western Canada, be they professional or amateur. Recognizing the importance of diverse perspectives on all environmental issues, a voice as unique and powerful as Dick Dekker's deserves to be heard, and this book will ensure his legacy as a classical, careful, and very literate outdoor naturalist.

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