

The Way of Natural History

Edited by THOMAS LOWE FLEISCHNER
Trinity University, \$16.95 paper,
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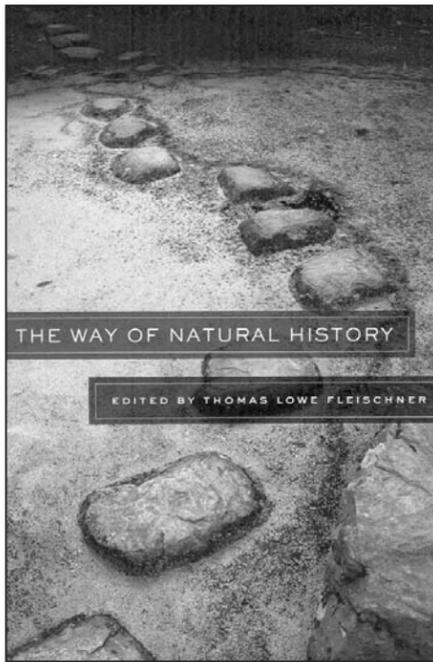
Field Notes on Science & Nature

Edited & Introduction by
MICHAEL R. CANFIELD
Foreword by E.O. WILSON
Harvard University, \$27.95 cloth,
ISBN 978-1-674-05757-9

For two books ostensibly on the same topic, I cannot imagine more tonally distinctive volumes addressing the need for renewing the daily practice of natural history observation in the modern, human-dominated world. Although both anthologies are elegantly conceived, gorgeously designed, and include major voices in contemporary science and nature writing, each has a decidedly different bias when it comes to addressing what Thomas Fleischner calls “the oldest continuous human tradition.” While these books are potentially complementary, at a more subliminal level they seem to draw a line in the sand about why and how natural history should be practiced, and perhaps they even differ as to who the practitioners should be. That is why it has been so engaging to read these books back to back, for they begin an intriguing debate that should have begun a long time ago, both within the scientific community and beyond.

To cut to the chase, the wonderfully

REVIEWER: **Gary Paul Nabhan** has an endowed chair in Sustainable Food Systems at the University of Arizona and promotes the practice of natural history from his field office on Tumamoc Hill, the oldest ecological restoration site in North America. His next book of natural and culinary history, *Desert Terroir*, is due this winter from the University of Texas Press.



diverse perspectives gathered in Fleischner's anthology, *The Way of Natural History*, are on the cusp of a growing consensus that the practice of natural history is a human predilection, a human right, and a human need to stay attentive to the other-than-human world. In contrast, Michael Canfield's beautifully illustrated and cogent anthology, *Field Notes on Science & Nature*, draws heavily but not exclusively on Boston Brahmins of the Harvard ilk to argue that the taking of natural history field notes remains important to the growth of the natural sciences if it is properly done by “scientific natural historians,” a term that several of the authors choose to describe themselves. While most of them demonstrate that natural history notes have been essential to generating new ideas in evolutionary ecology and animal behavior over the last half century, few of them (with the notable exceptions of Jenny Keller and Bernd Heinrich) speak to the

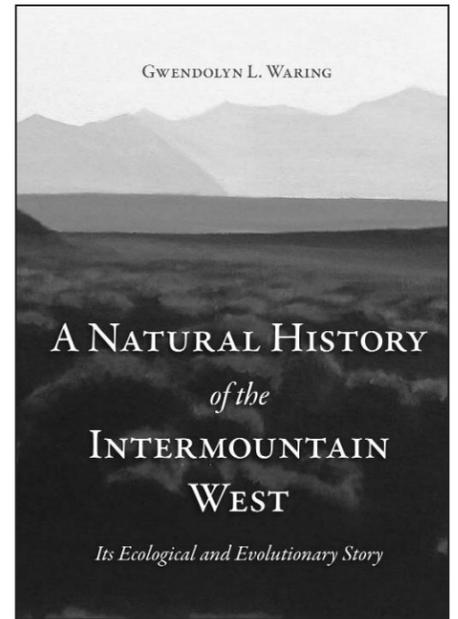
broader value of the natural history practice to human well-being, aesthetics, and psychological and spiritual health, or to the stewardship of nature. What's more, Canfield's contributors not only seem self-congratulatory in being the stalwarts who are maintaining this disappearing tradition but also seem largely unaware of several recent anthologies (including Fleischner's as well as Paul Dayton's) and the emergence of a broad coalition of naturalists participating in the nonprofit Natural History Network (www.naturalhistorynetwork.org). Contributor George B. Schaller's quote on the back cover of Canfield's anthology claiming that “there is no other book like this—one that takes readers out of the laboratory and into the field to learn the basics of natural history”—suggests that most of Canfield's selected lot are hardly up to snuff on exciting trends in natural history in their own country, let alone in others.

To truly understand these trends, there can be no better introduction than Fleischner's anthology. It views the renewal of the practice of attentiveness to the world through the protracted observation and documentation of natural phenomena as something broader than a privilege of academically trained biologists. While only two of Canfield's contributors have been professionally trained as something other than academic scientists, Fleischner includes award-winning poets (Alison Hawthorne Deming, Charles Goodrich, and Jane Hirshfield), environmental educators (R. Edward Grumbine and John Tallmadge), conservation activists (Dave Foreman and Robert Michael Pyle), literary essayists (Ken Lamberton and Scott Russell Sanders), eco-psychologists (Laura Sewall), philosophers of science (Kathleen Dean Moore), visual artists (Wren Farris and Sarah Juniper Rabkin), musicians (Richard Thompson), and even a late, great Zen master (Robert Aitken Roshi). Nevertheless, the contributing field ecologists (such as John Anderson, Paul Dayton, Stephen C. Trombulak, and Robin Wall Kimmerer) are just as prominent as those in Canfield's crew (Bernd Heinrich, Kenn Kaufman, George B. Schaller, and Edward O. Wilson). Only Pyle's essay in Fleischner's mix falls short of really opening up to the idea of seeing natural history in this broader, more dynamic context, but he offers an interesting though somewhat curmudgeonly defense of “his” tradition nonetheless. The overall difference in tone is striking: Most of Fleischner's contributors offer completely new insights about how natural history has always been hitched at the hip to other practices, including those related to contemplative religious traditions; to poetic and artistic expression; to perceptual, emotional, and spiritual healing; and to sciences other than biology. Fleischner himself sums it up well in his own essay, “The Mindfulness of Natural History”:

Among the attributes I've noticed in those who are attentive to nature are a greater sense of humility, affirmation, hope, and gratitude. At the end of a natural history outing, jaws often ache from smiling—there's so much joy, so much laughter. Who among us can't stand some of this tonic?

He concludes that “natural history is not a privilege, but a right—a fundamental capacity and need of all people.”

When all is said and done, all of us need both of these perspectives—those of the importance of natural history inside the field of biology as well as beyond it—for these books allow the paper in them to “smell of the woods,” just as the great naturalist Elliott Coues suggests they should. ■



A Natural History of the Intermountain West

Its Ecological and Evolutionary Story
GWENDOLYN L. WARING
University of Utah, \$29.95 paper,
ISBN 978-1-60781-028-5

There is indeed more in heaven and earth than is dreamed of in most philosophies—more in and on Earth, and certainly the Intermountain West, as testified to by Gwendolyn L. Waring. Her *Natural History of the Intermountain West* is a comprehensive account of the landforms and waterways, the flora and fauna of the mountainous regions of Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico.

There is also much more not just in perceiving and in naming, but in the many more complexities of cause and effect and of time and space, than most of us “know.” Plato talked of reality and illusion, of caves, captives, and shadows. So did Cervantes, whose iconic hero tried valiantly not just to ascertain his illusions but to act on them and in so doing determine them “real.”

Scientists have their philosophical quandaries, too, and the disciplines of geology, archaeology, and ecology raise as many questions about what's really out there (and in there) as they answer. That's one of the many fascinating aspects of the ecology and evolution of the Intermountain West. Certainly early explorers took good-faith steps to observe, map, and chart the nominal unknown, assuming that, in part, to name what they saw gave it meaning. Cultural relativity as well as historiography confused the issue even more, or clarified it, paradoxically, by attempting to fathom the mysteries beheld before, during, and while in the acts of analysis and classification.

It's no surprise that Waring includes key appendixes to her book, which simply list many plants and animals of the southern Rockies and intermountain region and offer an extensive glossary of key scientific terms and even metric conversion tables. The common reader will not only find these aids useful but will muse anew on just how complex the linguistic and taxonomic aspects of attempting to know and describe a place really are. Thanks to the processes of “naming nature” over the past few centuries, words for doing so come in many languages with the semantic issues of translation.

True to her training as a biologist and evolutionary ecologist, Waring attempts to neatly order and arrange her expositions and descriptions in the tried-and-true yet disarmingly oversimplified means of outlining, of coordination and subordination, of division and paral-

REVIEWER: **Robert F. Gish** is the author of the memoir *Songs of My Hunter Heart: A Western Kinship* and of *West Bound: Stories of Providence*, both published by the University of New Mexico.

Prairie Fire

A Great Plains History

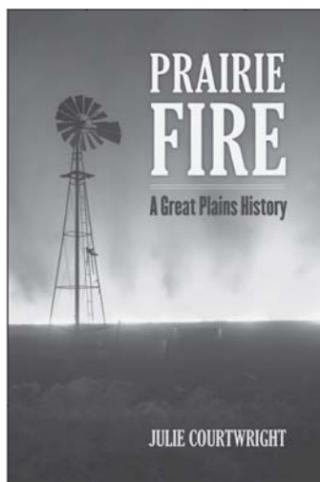
Julie Courtwright

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