Alexander Skutch:
An Appreciation

Edited by **Hunter Lewis**
Foreword by **Dana Gardner**
With an Introduction by **Frank Graham, Jr.**

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Axios Press

Axios Press
P.O. Box 118
Mount Jackson, VA 22842
888.542.9467 press@axiosinstitute.org

Library of Congress Catalog Control Number: 2004091036

ISBN: 0-9661908-7-4

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our thanks to Ramón Mena Moya, Dana Gardner, Frank Graham, Jr., *Audubon* Magazine, the Tropical Sciences Center in Costa Rica, and the original publishers of Alexander Skutch's books: Aberdeen University Press, Nuttal Ornithological Club, University of California Press, University of Iowa Press, University of Oklahoma Press, University of Texas Press, and University Press of Florida.

FOREWORD

BY DANA GARDNER

For the past 28 years I have made yearly pilgrimages to Alexander Skutch's farm, Los Cusingos, to visit and do some painting in the peace and quiet of his little patch of tropical forest. This year I planned my trip to coincide with his 100th birthday. A couple of weeks before the event, however, I went down to stay with him for a few days. I am very, very glad that I did, as he passed away eight days short of his birthday. Because it was unseasonably rainy, I set up my painting table in the end *sala* where Skutch would sit and read each morning, and we kept each other company. Although Alexander had been deteriorating physically for the last couple of years, was confined to a wheel chair, and had become hard of hearing, he remained mentally alert and in very high spirits. Last year when I arrived for a visit I found him reading a book on planetary physics. This year he was rereading many of his own books that he had written years earlier. He told me he was refreshing his memory. He still received occasional visitors, and graciously welcomed

them, apologizing for not being able to rise to greet them. He wished them a pleasant walk in his forest, something he had been unable to do for several years, but he enjoyed hearing about what birds they saw.

Only on the penultimate day of my stay did a nagging cough rapidly escalate to the point where he could barely talk and his breathing became erratic and labored. I sat with him that night and held his hand; I was sure he was about to die. He half opened his eyes, saw me, and struggled to tell me something. I thought I was to hear the last words of this wise old naturalist, and they turned out to be a request to have a dentist appointment made for him the next week! His tired old decrepit body was sending him a message, but he was having none of that—he was making plans for the future. I realized then that he wouldn't die quite yet. The next day was my planned departure day. He had quit coughing and had slept well, had eaten breakfast, and was once again reading. It was a gorgeous sunny morning, the first sunny morning in more than a week of overcast weather. A beautiful Turquoise Cotinga came out to sun itself in a bare tree at the edge of the yard. I left Los Cusingos in the early afternoon and planned to return for his 100th birthday party the next week, but I found out later that Alexander's health quickly deteriorated in the afternoon, and he died peacefully early that evening.

He was buried at Los Cusingos, as he wished, a few feet from the worn out, but still beautiful, old house that he built by hand some 62 years ago. Nearly 100 people showed up for the interment, including neighbors of many years, birdwatchers young and old, and a group of school children in their uniforms.

I have many fond memories of my visits with Alexander and Pamela Skutch over the years, and my best paintings were made in the tranquility of Los Cusingos. A very keen observer of the natural world, Skutch wrote 30 some books on general natural history and travel, the habits of birds, and religion and philosophy. His detailed life histories of over 300 species of tropical birds are great contributions to neotropical ornithology. He was nevertheless a very modest and humble man, and he had perhaps the simplest personal philosophy of anyone I've ever met: don't do anything that hurts other feeling creatures, and live simply and modestly so as not to tax the environment and its resources. He lived by these principles every day of his long life.

I will miss him, as will the many people who enjoyed visiting Los Cusingos and continue to enjoy reading his many books. I may still go and visit Los Cusingos, however, as it is now a sanctuary for neotropical birds run by the Tropical Science Center. Visits by tourists, birdwatchers, and researchers are encouraged. The yard and pasture by the river will be turned into a botanical garden, and Skutch's old house will be restored and turned into a museum.

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INTRODUCTION

BY FRANK GRAHAM, JR.
(*AUDUBON* MAGAZINE, MARCH 1979)

Alexander Skutch lifted his machete and struck at the vines hanging like cordage across the path, and we stepped into the rain forest that covers most of his land on the slopes above the valley of El General in southern Costa Rica. We walked in single file along the path, between trees whose variety is unmatched anywhere outside the tropics. Skutch pointed to each, gave it a name, and mentioned some peculiarity that distinguished it from its look-alikes all around us. He picked out each birdcall uttered behind the congestion of leaves and identified the species. It was apparent that he lives on the same terms of easy familiarity with the plants and animals in this dim world as Henry Thoreau enjoyed in the woods around Walden Pond.

"Skutch is absolutely unique in ornithology today," Eugene Eisenmann of the American Museum of Natural History had told me before I left New York. "He's a throwback—or perhaps a logical continuation of the

pioneer naturalists. He knows more about the natural history and general biology of tropical American birds than anyone else."

[Famed ornithologist and artist] Roger Tory Peterson speaks of Skutch as having done for Central American birds what Audubon did for those in North America, seeking them out and describing them to the world vividly and accurately, although in prose, rather than in paint. And Robert Ricklefs of the University of Pennsylvania writes:

> I think it is fair to say that were it not for Skutch's work and its influence on younger ornithologists, we would know next to nothing about the reproductive behavior of the tropical New World birds. Indeed, Skutch has left little of the privacy of his subjects uninvaded.

Alec Skutch's formidable reputation as a compiler of avian life histories obscures the variety of his adventures, interests, and skills.... [T]his Maryland expatriate has lived in the tropics for [most of his life], arriving there as a professional botanist and earning his living for six years by collecting plants for sale to museums. Settling down in Costa Rica, of which he is now a citizen, he has farmed,... survived falls from horses and trees, encounters with tropical snakes and diseases, and the inevitable Latin American revolution. Yet whatever the realities of danger, discomfort, or earning a living, he has relentlessly pursued his objective of uncovering the hitherto unknown habits of tropical birds.

It may be that Skutch's most ambitious, and ultimately his grandest, undertaking is the attempt to invest his

lifelong experience in the natural world with spiritual significance. He has read widely in philosophy and the history of religions. As a conservationist in the most profound sense, he has looked tirelessly for a meaning behind human existence and the ties, physical and emotional, that bind us so closely to other forms of life. In dozens of articles and [numerous] books,... he has explored the evolutionary experience. Although dogma repels him, he ventures the conclusion that human life is not purposeless, that the moments of intense pleasure we experience in our encounters with nature may be the justification of the inconceivably long process that created a glorious natural world and put us in its midst, and that we are the organs through which the universe appreciates and tries to understand itself.

"Doubtless all animals enjoy their existence; certainly we should wish it so," Skutch wrote after returning from a "precious moment" among the wealth of living things in the rain forest. "But perhaps only to humans, on this planet, is it given to enjoy with gratitude and understanding the sources of our delight. The two poles between which the universe evolves appear to be the immensity of space and the plasticity of matter, on the one hand, and appreciative, grateful minds on the other. Perhaps the latter, whatever the form of the body that supports them, are the goal or fulfillment of the whole stupendous process, with all the strife and pain that seem inseparable from the movement that gives birth to beauty and joy. The conviction has grown upon me that this is the most fruitful interpretation of our presence here."

It is not an outlook likely to find favor with either Darwinians or egalitarians. Purists in evolutionary theory

contend that natural selection has no purpose and does not necessarily lead to "higher" organisms. The process is its own justification. And, for the democratically minded, Skutch's belief that only a handful of human beings "are at any time so situated, and so endowed by nature, that they can respond to the beauty and wonder of the cosmos with the keen appreciation that it merits," must smack of elitism. But as we shall see, his attachment both to natural beauty and the extraordinary moments when the mind and senses savor it is so intense that he rebels at the prospect that they are wholly ephemeral.

What caught and held the young botanist above everything else when he went to the tropics was the splendor of its birds. For him, scientific doctrine led inevitably to esthetics: Evolution, over vast stretches of time, fashioned not only those winged creatures in their nearly infinite diversity and beauty but also the human mind which is capable in varying degrees of appreciating them.

"For a large and growing number of people, birds are the strongest bond with the living world of nature," Skutch has written. "They charm us with lovely plumage and melodious songs; our quest of them takes us to the fairest places; to find them and uncover some of their well-guarded secrets we exert ourselves greatly and live intensely. In the measure that we appreciate and understand them and are grateful for our coexistence with them, we help to bring to fruition the age long travail that made them and us. This, I am convinced, is the highest significance of our relationship with birds."

This was the man, and the natural setting, I had come thousands of miles to see. For a birdwatcher, the rain forests of Latin America and the West Indies are as El

Dorado to a sixteenth-century conquistador. The region as a whole supports a third of this planet's 8,600 species of birds, and Costa Rica alone, which is about the size of Vermont and New Hampshire combined, has 760 kinds, more than the total of all those that regularly visit or make their homes in our forty-eight contiguous states.

While nature-lovers travel around the world to see the large mammals and birds they have known from picture-books since childhood, equally as intense for me is the lure of the smaller Central American birds because of the names by which English-speaking naturalists know them. Simply to list a few of those names is to compose an elegant lyric: The White-whiskered Softwing, Blue-crowned Chlorophonia, Scarlet-thighed Dacnis (a honeycreeper), Masked Tityra, Violaceous Trogon, Three-wattled Bellbird, Scaly-throated Leaftosser, Blue-diademed Motmot, Fiery-billed Araçari, Chestnut-mandibled Toucan, Cinnamon-bellied Flower-piercer, Rose-breasted Thrush-tanager (of uncertain family), Olivaceous Piculet, Bellicose Elaenia, Tawny-winged Dendrocincla (a woodcreeper), Buff-throated Foliage-gleaner, Plain Xenops (poor thing), Slaty Castlebuilder—and my special favorite, the Oleaginous Pipromorpha. Although this last is described as "a small, olive green bird of undistinguished appearance," only a soul of lumpish tendencies would prefer its alternate name, the Ochre-bellied Flycatcher.

And now, with my incomparable guide, I was among those birds and the plants on which they live. I know I shall not experience many more such moments as those of my first walk in a tropical forest. My pleasure was doubled by the awareness that Alec Skutch shared it, that

he approached the forest with the awe and enthusiasm he must have felt on his own first encounter with it.

"The Rufous Piha," he said, stopping abruptly and indicating with a nod the direction from which a piercing whistle had come. "A kind of cotinga. It's the only fairly large forest bird that has survived here in fair numbers. The local people shoot at any large target, and most of the big toucans, parrots, jacamars, falcons, woodpeckers, sunbitterns, and the like are gone."

Skutch remained motionless on the path, probing the foliage through his binoculars. "There it is," he said at last, and I followed his upward-pointing finger and picked out the piha, a ruddy-brown bird about the size of an American Robin. Skutch waited until I had had a satisfactory look and then moved on.

As he led the way into the forest, he occasionally ran his eyes over a brushy tangle before stepping through it, alert for poisonous snakes, but for the most part he searched the trees for the small birds in which the land abounds. Skutch is of medium height, slender, with a strong step.... He frequently drew the machete that was strapped to his waist and wielded it efficiently against vines and branches in our path.

"People sometimes speak of the 'jungle' in Central America," he said at one point. "But that was really a creation of William Beebe's imagination when he wrote about this part of the world. The true jungle is in Asia. This is a *forest*, where the undergrowth is not normally dense unless it has been cut over and new growth is sprouting. The tangles here are usually made up of vines and fallen trees."

Some of the vines were truly formidable, the largest of which was a woody liana called *Entada gigas*. We came across one specimen nearly fifteen inches in diameter. In its prime the liana had moved in heavy loops from one tall tree to another, smothering foliage with its twice-pinnate leaves and breaking trunks down under its enormous weight, so that now it undulated like some moss-covered serpent for hundreds of feet over the forest floor, into which its victims had long since decayed.

Trying to trace the convolutions of this enormous plant as it wandered off into the gloom, I was reminded that around me there was taking place a deadly struggle in slow motion, where plants of all kinds clambered over and strangled one another as they reached for the sun and survival. While the failures in this frozen tableau, this static violence that is the essence of the rain forest, crumbled into the leaf-litter, the winners pushed upward where their crowns fit together in places, as Skutch said, "like the tiles in a mosaic." Here and there pieces of the mosaic were missing, and columns of light broke through to be fractured by vines and foliage as they plunged to the forest floor.

In one of those miniature sunlit clearings a Morpho Butterfly, dipping and darting from the shadows on its big azure wings, surprised us into a cry of delight. As if in answer to our indiscretion in this quiet place, a small flock of Whitecrowned Parrots flew raucously overhead. (There is a band of White-faced or Capuchin Monkeys in the canopy of this forest too, but incessant shooting has made its survivors wary, and I never saw them.) My life list of birds expanded quickly as Skutch detected various chirps and trills and pointed out their sources—a