

BOOK REVIEW

A Naturalist in New Guinea. Bruce M. Beehler. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991. Pp. 251. \$26.95 (hardcover). ISBN 0-292-75541-4.

Europeans have been fascinated by the remarkable flora and fauna of the island of New Guinea for centuries, beginning with the first importations of plumes of its birds of paradise in the 1500s. Bruce Beehler is representative of the new breed of naturalists who go there to conduct intensive, long-term field research rather than cursory collecting expeditions. Beehler has spent a total of almost five years in New Guinea, spread over eight visits beginning with his 1974 study of bird of paradise courtship behavior, but increasingly focusing on ecological topics.

Following many technical publications, his book is intended for general audiences, offered as "lay introduction to the island's natural history and a sort of catalog of the things naturalists do when out in the forest" (p. 12). The styles of presentation is episodic, "a more-or-less chronological narrative based on [his] own experiences" (p. 12), with numerous related line drawings accompanying each chapter and a separate section of color plates. Interspersed among the field stories recounted are illuminating examples of how research problems can be redefined in the field. For example, while pursuing the question of why some bird of paradise species are monogamous and others polygynous, Beehler found he had to study their food resources as well, resulting in a realization that birds of paradise are "more than just a group [42 spp.] of beautiful birds adorning New Guinea's rainforest ... [They] are critical for the dissemination of seeds of rainforest plants and are thus an important force in the regeneration of the Papuan environment" (p. 139).

Beehler's insightful reflections on his work and experiences are relevant to regions far beyond New Guinea, and he is especially effective at disabusing the reader of simplistic notions. Thus, despite the fact that his main ornithological interest is in some of the world's most spectacular fauna, he cautions that "[the] real jungle, most of the time, appears dull and dark. Much of each day the forest is silent and there is not a bird to be seen for love or money. Perhaps that is why for so many decades the rainforest has received little attention from the world at large. The rewards are hard-won" (p. 205).

For the ethnobiologist reader, there is much to learn and enjoy in Beehler's book, but one glaring omission is continually evident. While he periodically refers to his local field assistants, and argues for increased training of "promising indigenous naturalists" (p. 243), nowhere in the book does Beehler indicate that he learned anything from them. "When food acquisition is concerned, the New Guineans leave nothing to chance—this is not sport, after all" (p. 216): all the more reason to suppose that their folk biological knowledge has remained a vast resource inexplicably untapped by this otherwise meticulous and keen observer.

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