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On Watching Birds

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REVIEW

Florida Field Naturalist 17(3): 75-76, 1989.

On watching birds.—Lawrence Kilham. 1988. Chelsea Green Publishing Co., Chelsea, Vermont. ISBN 0-930031-14-8. 187 pp., 7 double-page pencil drawings by Joan Waltermire. \$17.95.—Some books are entertaining, some are informational, a few are inspirational but not many change the reader's life. For me, "On Watching Birds" is in the latter category.

I have casually observed bird behavior over the years but I have never done it with diligence, nor with a folding chair, as Lawrence Kilham has. He believes that a comfortable chair (I guess it could be a Morris chair if you have a truck to transport it) is important because it has a settling effect and makes you sit still. Also, it makes you content to stay in one place and watch, especially at those times when nothing much is happening.

The idea of doing my bird observations in place becomes more attractive the older I get. What really excites me, however, is the opportunity to become really well-acquainted with a bird and even to discover facets of its behavior that are not known to science. Dr. Kilham has done just that. The author is a virologist who has been a careful student of bird behavior for some 40 years. His books include "Life Histories of the Woodpeckers of Eastern North America" and "The American Crow and the Common Raven." Dr. Kilham and his wife reside in Lyme, New Hampshire.

"On Watching Birds" is not just another book about how to become a better birder. It is an introduction to the fascinating and time-demanding avocation of bird behavior watching. As Dr. Kilham practices it, behavior-watching is not a sometime thing. He tells of going out at dawn so as to be at his observation point before a pair of Pileated Woodpeckers started their day's activities. As the sun hung low over Georgia's Sapelo Island, the author noted that the female flew off into a distant pine grove and soon was making *cuk* sounds. The male swung into his nearby roost hole for the night, then gave a burst of drumming. "Thus, with a flourish," he added, "the pair kept in touch at the last of the day, as they had gotten in touch at sunrise."

It can be freely predicted that Dr. Kilham's nicely crafted volume will not appeal to those frenetic bird listers who consider that they have to cover at least 300 miles a field trip day to remain in good standing in their exclusive fraternity.

The rest of us, however, may be inspired to take a pen, notebook, binoculars and folding chair into our backyard or some woodland, pond or field that is a highly favorable place for behavior watching. A spot that offers a clear view of a nest is particularly good. Much remains to be discovered about even our commonest birds.

Dr. Kilham makes extensive rough notes in the field, including details of foraging, flying, courtship, territory, nesting, preening, etc. At home, he rewrites and indexes his notes, as well as, checking books and periodicals to see how his observations compare with those of others.

One Kilham brainstorm I can hardly wait to duplicate: he wired sections of fallen logs (decayed but not too much so) to fence posts in his yard. Before long, four Downy Woodpeckers investigated them and eventually set about excavating for roost sites.

Dr. Kilham devotes eight pages of his chapter on south Florida to observations of Sandhill Cranes not far from the Archbold Biological Station. During times when cranes were absent, the writer came to appreciate the strange appeal of the Florida scrub. He enjoyed just "being alive in a beautiful place" and gaining a "wonderful sense of the peacefulness of nature." That's a bonus for behavior-watching in one place.

I especially enjoyed Dr. Kilham's observations of birds and mammals at "the Pickledish," a series of ponds in a granite basin in New Hampshire. Sadly, it was violated by a bulldozer. I wish the book had advised me of its fate, so that I could have directed a more precise course at "progress."

The author has traveled and behavior-watched quite widely. There is, for example, a delightful chapter on Central America.

Dr. Kilham's conclusion is worth noting: "What I like about behavior-watching . . . is that it not only strengthens my bonds with the beauty of nature, but also my empathy with living things. Goethe thought the worst thing that can happen to man is alienation from nature. Merging with nature for the time that one is absorbed in watching some bird or animal is a way of hanging onto the fundamental self that, in many people, seems in danger of extinction."—**Ken Morrison**, Kingfisher Cove, Babson Park, Florida 33827.

REPORT

Summary of the 1989 spring meeting.—The spring 1989 meeting of the Florida Ornithological Society was held at the Holiday Inn Riverfront in Bradenton, Florida, from 28-30 April. Manatee County Audubon Society was the host chapter, and Meric Woodward was the local committee chairman.

During the Board meeting on Friday, Naomi Edelson of the University of Florida was awarded the Helen G. and Allan D. Cruickshank Research Award for work on "Foraging ecology of wading birds: use of altered wetlands in Polk County, Florida." With the proceeds from the FOS Dry Tortugas trip, the endowment of the Research Fund is now over \$10,000. The President announced the receipt of a grant for \$5,603 from the Frank Stanley Beveridge Foundation for the purchase of a computer. The Board voted a dues increase effective in 1990. A grant of \$800 was voted for the Florida Breeding Bird Atlas project.

During the annual membership meeting on Saturday, new officers and directors were elected. Their names appear elsewhere in this issue.

The paper session on Saturday afternoon consisted of a workshop on Burrowing Owls moderated by Brian Millsap of the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission. Speakers were Brian Mealy of the Museum of Science in Miami on the status of Burrowing Owls in Dade and Broward Counties, Julie Hovis of FGFWFC on the status in the Florida Keys, and Cindy Bear of the Audubon Society of Southwest Florida and Brian Millsap on the impact of urban growth at Cape Coral. A question and answer session followed the presentations.

The skin quiz, prepared by Dr. J. W. Hardy of the University of Florida, consisted mostly of wings only. Glen Wolfenden won first prize, a photo of a Great Egret by Don Bansen of Manatee County Audubon. Bill Pranty won second prize, a set of tapes of calls of birds of Mexico from ARA Records.

Dr. James Layne of Archbold Biological Station was the banquet speaker on Saturday evening. He spoke on the natural history of the Crested Caracara and his work with the species. Before the banquet program, outgoing President Dave Goodwin recognized Caroline Coleman for her long and devoted service as Treasurer. Wes Biggs presented a framed Ray Harm print of a Purple Martin and a set of "Oceanic Birds of South America" by Robert Cushman Murphy to Bill Pranty of Pasco County as Breeding Bird Atlas Coordinator of the Year.

Field trips were held to Fort DeSoto Park; to Beer Can Island and Selby Gardens; and to Riverview, Simmons Park, and Little Manatee River State Recreation Area. A boat trip to the National Audubon Washburn Sanctuary in Terra Ceia Bay was also provided.

The usual good time was had by all. The fall meeting will be 6-8 October in Titusville.—**Bruce Neville**, 8221 SW 72 Ave., #273, Miami, Florida 33143.