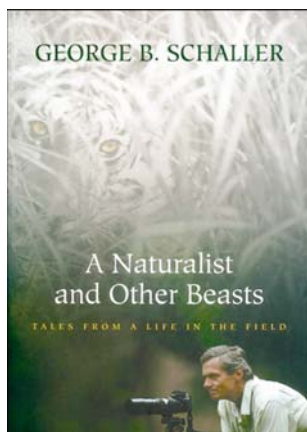


## BOOK REVIEWS



**A Naturalist and Other Beasts: Tales from a Life in the Field.** George B. Schaller. Sierra Club Books, Second Street, San Francisco, CA 94105, USA. 2007. 272 pp. (Paperback). Price: US\$ 16.95. ISBN-13: 978-1-57805.

'At least once in a lifetime', Schaller urges in this book, 'everyone should make a pilgrimage into the wilderness to dwell on its wonders and discover the idyll of a past now largely gone.'

George B. Schaller, the legendary naturalist-explorer of our time, needs no introduction. Considered by many of us as the father of field biology, he is renowned for his ground-breaking studies on many charismatic species such as the African lion, Indian tiger, jaguar, snow leopard, mountain gorilla, Marco Polo sheep, chiru and giant panda. Schaller's credentials as a field biologist are immaculate, and so are his writing skills. His works have been echoed in classic books such as National Book Award winner, *The Serengeti Lion*, *The Year of the Gorilla*, *The Last Panda* and many more. This book is an assortment of 19 such soul-nourishing short essays, interwoven with his personal reflections on natural history and life itself, previously published in various magazines and books over the past five decades providing a unique overview of his legendary career.

The chapters are organized tidily into four continental sections. Beginning as a young biologist in the Arctic of the North America, Schaller takes us on an extraordinary journey to varied unique and wild places not travelled to by most, introducing us to the animals he studied and cherished, that many of us will never see in the wild 'Knowing such animals individually', he writes, 'one begins to

view an area with a new intimacy and with a caring that turns into a special enchantment'. The charm of the book lies in his brazen love of the species he studies and his elegant way of describing them. His own photographs of field work, author himself and his family apart from the species he has observed and the places he has explored appear throughout the book, giving us a glimpse of the world he has lived.

While reading the book, I could not resist the feeling of walking with him to those remote places he has described. Descriptions of the species and the landscape are enhanced by the fact that Schaller is also a trained ethologist, and knows the way of recording minute and significant observations. He considers himself as 'a nineteenth-century naturalist', who uses pen and photograph as potent weapons against human ignorance of the grace of nature, to reach people to conserve a species. Novel to this book are Schaller's introductions for each chapter, his present thoughts, which update information on the species, and their present conservation challenges. With a tap of spiritual aestheticism, occasionally dwelling on a kind of quest of understanding nature, both the outer as well as his own true nature, Schaller writes, 'After all, the reasons for any quest dwell deep within us and are not always accessible even to introspection.' But then again it is not the story of a quest, but of a life's experience that the author lives intensely moment by moment. The initial chapters present the author as a pure field biologist in his early career but, as later essays show, he has broadened his outlook over the time to become an outspoken proponent for conserving these wild animals and their habitats.

The introduction part titled 'Of marvels and memories', itself comes out as marvellous portrait of the life, work and philosophy of the author. Speaking of his view on conservation Schaller writes, 'there is no final destination for conservation ...I have chosen a never ending path...so I strive to protect something that will outlive me.' He rightly points out that 'conservation problems are social and economic, not scientific... research is easy; Conservation most decidedly is not', appealing to biologists, especially to the ecologists to be committed to science education, conservation and public outreach beyond their research. He writes in the same chapter that

today people speak of nature as 'natural resources' and he finds today's conservation assembly lacking in heart, '... an appeal for conservation must reach the heart, not just the mind', because 'conservation without moral values cannot sustain itself'. Defining a field biologist in 'Feral Biologist', he points out, 'patience becomes a more valuable commodity than intellect...Indeed, a field biologist's greatest danger lies not in encounters with fierce creatures and treacherous terrain, but in being seduced by the comforts of civilization.' A feral biologist...he says is 'someone who suffers from cultural shock not when settling into a project but on returning home, he is a true feral biologist'.

Schaller's literary talent, pooled with his zeal for getting to ground in the field, triumphs over many of the finest nature writings. 'Flowing towards me like a wall of dark brown lava', he remembers at Sheenjek river on Alaska's North Slope, when surrounded by the caribou herd. While observing capybaras in Argentina, he recalls '...As I lay looking up at the rodents, I felt like a strayed Lilliputian among a colony of field mice.' Telling of his many futile efforts to catch the elusive jaguar to radio collar in Brazil's Pantanal, he reveals 'jaguars may even kill cows by crunching open their skulls, using a primitive force alien to lions and tigers'. In the Virunga Mountains he writes, '...felt a brief spasm of panic, for the gorillas had never behaved in this manner before', while he flees onto a tree when charged by D.J., a silverback mountain gorilla. In the Serengeti, Schaller speaks of an anxious moonlit night, '...night with menacing snarls...the air with the odor of blood', with a pride of lionesses eating a zebra. '...their frosty eyes remind me of immense solitudes', he writes for elusive snow leopards which he studied in the Hindu Kush mountain. 'I was grateful for her curiosity and boldness...I would not have seen much of her without her consent', he writes in the same chapter, while watching a snow leopard eating her kill. The plain beauty and truth in his prose which appear throughout the book, totally floored me again and again. Other chapters describe studying the behaviour of the great blue heron, stalking tigers in India, his hermit in the snow-laden land of the giant panda, witnessing vast herds of Mongolian gazelle and chiru, observing mating behaviour of

bharal, searching new species in the wild areas of Vietnam and Laos and many more; the book is full of such lucidly written, patient observations and fascinating encounters filled with the marvel of living amidst the wild beasts and his footprints among them.

This book describes doing field research in a way that combines the practical issues, political reflections and sociological issues. Schaller thus focuses well on a number of diverse levels while making the facts interesting and vital, which shows his broad understanding of the conservation issues. Schaller mentions about wildlife science too, but without sounding like a scientist, and those seeking to be a naturalist, even if it has nothing to do with wildlife science and conservation, can learn a lot from reading about his experience. On the surface, this book seems to be simply a description of one man's thoughts and views on the 'beasts' and their wild places, but underneath lies Schaller's philosophy, ideals and beliefs intertwined with his struggles and hardships throughout the journey he has taken to observe and preserve the wilderness he loves and respects. But more than just interesting adventure essays, or a portrayal of nature, it is a primer on the essence of finding one's true identity, and the contemplation of just being what you are and what you love.

I first came to know about George Schaller through Peter Matthiessen's book *The Snow Leopard* (1973), where he accompanied Schaller who hikes through the Himalayas and the Tibetan plateau to explore the mountain wilderness. This book made an unforgettable impression of Schaller, whose readings later shaped my perception about wildlife conservation and life itself.

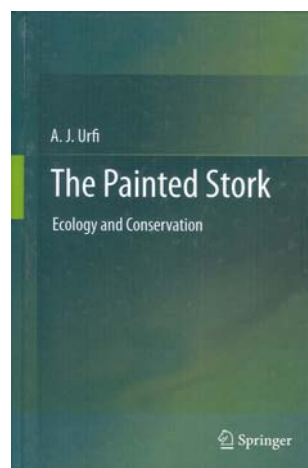
This book is the best synopsis of Schaller's work on hand and emphasizes precisely why National Geographic conferred its Lifetime Achievement Award upon him in 2007, which is just one of the many prestigious awards that he has been honoured with. But his true legacy lies in inspiring, directly or indirectly, generations of many renowned naturalists and biologists the world over, as well as establishing over 20 parks and preserves worldwide. Schaller quotes of Milarepa, a 12th century Tibetan hermit, 'Do if you like that which may seem sinful, but help living beings, because that is truly pious work', and a German poet

Johann Friedrich, 'What the inner voice says will not disappoint the hoping soul', which rightly reflects Schaller's beliefs and outlook.

This book makes a strong case for the conservation of unique and diminishing natural wilderness across the globe: 'After all, it is the only home we shall ever have'. The book is well worth the read and will appeal to both general audiences and biologists. Hopefully will inspire an unprejudiced understanding of nature by future naturalists.

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**The Painted Stork: Ecology and Conservation.** A. J. Urfi. Springer Science + Business Media, LLC, 233 Spring Street, NY10013, USA. 2011. xvii + 163 pp. Price: US\$ 129.00.

India is home to about 1300 species of birds. While it is true that there exists a body of knowledge about birds of the Indian subcontinent with respect to their natural history, there is a marked paucity of detailed studies that focus on their ecology. Amongst the latter, very few studies have presented an exhaustive treatment of a single species. Such studies are particularly vital if the species in question is one of conservation importance.

A. J. Urfi's research on the Painted Stork is exemplary in that it is one of the

few studies that have explored the various ecological aspects for a single species of bird and that too for a long period of time. The Painted Stork (*Mycteria leucocephala*) is a large, conspicuously plumaged wetland bird that is widespread across South and Southeast Asia. Although this species has the largest population among the storks that reside in Asia, it is facing a decline under anthropogenic activities and changes in land use. Over the years, the Painted Stork has emerged as an appropriate mascot for wetlands and their conservation. In the book under review, Urfi presents an exhaustive monograph on the Painted Stork, attempting to encyclopedically cover the important features of the ecology of the species. Urfi draws frequently from the studies that he has been doing along with his colleagues and students, focusing on the stork colony in the Delhi Zoo complex, and supplementing it with information for relevant studies done elsewhere. The introductory chapter looks at the Painted Stork in the global perspective, first discussing the systematics of the species. The author then compares it with its congeners, particularly the other Asian *Mycteria* – the Milky Stork. The remaining part of the chapter is dedicated to the distribution of the species globally and within the Indian subcontinent, and summarizes the known ecological information about the Painted Stork. Towards the end of this chapter Urfi offers arguments about why this species is an important target for research: its large size, its dependence on wetlands, its specialized diet and its habit of nesting in colonies makes it an ideal species to answer a variety of ecological and environmental questions – both theoretical as well as applied. All these points are subsequently elaborated in the chapters that follow.

In chapter 2, Urfi looks at coloniality – one of the most important ecological traits of the Painted Stork that has a bearing on its survival. Starting with a broader theoretical background about coloniality in birds and the evolution of this phenomenon, the author moves on to case studies on the Painted Stork. He stresses that forage availability is the determining factor that governs the nesting ecology of the species. Urfi then goes on to describe the types of colonies based on location and highlights the fact that colonial nesting areas (called heronries) outside the protected area network, e.g.