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THE RESTRICTED NATURALIST

Review of: Ken Lamberton 2000. *Wilderness and Razor Wire: A Naturalist's Observations from Prison*. San Francisco: Mercury House 218 pp.
[Twenty-seventh in a series on "naturalist-in" books.]

Naturalist-in books are about being a naturalist in a particular place. Almost always it is a place of the author's choosing, but Ken Lamberton was in an Arizona prison. This book makes frequent reference to his thoughts and feelings about how he came to be there.

Growing up in the American southwest, Lamberton collected specimens and kept a variety of creatures in home terraria, as do most young naturalists. He did his undergraduate degree in Biology at the University of Arizona and then became a teacher. That was how he got into trouble. On an uncontrollable impulse, he left his wife and children to run off with one of his underage students. Without dwelling on it, Lamberton makes no excuses or claims that his 12-year prison sentence was unjust. He was released in 2000.

It was in prison that he began writing, and the book opens by telling us that he is writing from the upper bunk of his cell.

Several of the 24 chapters -- which include eight one- or two-page vignettes -- first appeared as magazine articles. An especially attractive feature is such chapter titles as "Sacred Regrets", "The Wisdom of Toads" and "The Importance of Trees". Another is his fine, detailed drawings of plants and animals.

One chapter, titled "Queen" has no natural history at all and was presumably included to ensure that the reader cannot ignore the setting of these studies. It is about Mark, a flagrantly bisexual cell-mate, who wore makeup and preferred to be called Marra.

A solid biological sense pervades this book. In the opening chapter Lamberton notes that "Nature is not always so aesthetic as those socially conscious, nature-as-art Victorian writers would have us believe -- unless you consider, for example, that death by slow evisceration is a beautiful thing. I've often thought that, if you want to write best-selling horror novels, you should first study the insect world." And then he proceeds, beautifully, to describe a tachinid fly larva eating a caterpillar from the inside.

It would have been quite easy to write a lot of romantic nonsense, for example about the harvester ants (*Pogonomyrmex* sp.) that he observed, but Lamberton does nothing of the sort. Rather, he shows a solid understanding of the basis of their societies. And he knows to express himself dramatically. The mass of winged harvester-ant queens and males emerging for the mating flight, for example, is "a shuddering cloud of sex drive evaporating into the air." Or "I hold the toad and allow myself to listen to wildness, the freedom of its voice."

Lamberton knows the literature and occasionally cites or quotes from other authors, always relevantly, never to show off. His reference to our desire to know the names of species as "this vocational inheritance from Adam" is such a by-the-way reference to *Genesis* 2:19 that I am sure most readers will not even notice.

Lamberton could see the desert vegetation outside, hear the coyotes howling, but under his circumstances there is little emphasis on the untouchable landscape and a great deal on life cycles and the passing of the seasons. In a region where the summer can last eight months, it makes sense that he recognizes stages within it: foresummer, monsoon summer and aftersummer.

The Sonora Desert year includes some distinctly hard times, and its creatures are adapted to survive them, something to which Lamberton can certainly relate. "I have become a disciple of wildflowers and brittlebushes. I am tortoise, saguaro. I will survive the seasons of heat and frost and storm, and I will survive the drought."

In the chapter on "Swallows and Doing Time", Lamberton tells of looking forward to the yearly return of the barn swallows, which nested on the prison grounds. He kept made observations of reproductive success and failure and wrestled with the question of why this bird nests in colonies. There is no evident shortage of nesting sites, and the gregarious habit would seem to be beset by disadvantages.

Lamberton's central wildlife interest was birds, especially birds of prey. He even kept a prison lifelist, regrettably not included as an appendix. It bears emphasis that he actually observed them, unlike the great mass of "bird watchers" who just count species.

A key theme of the book is the fascination for wild nature that some inmates shared with Lamberton. To his surprise, others with swallows nesting in their cells took a protective interest in the birds and joined him in missing them when they flew south for the winter. Some fed bread to birds in the yard, a punishable breach of prison rules. And when a hawk captured a raven outside the fence during exercise and perched on a nearby tree to eat it, the men stood transfixed and talked about this amazing spectacle for months afterward. This is entirely consistent with E.O. Wilson's (1984) concept of *biophilia*, that humans have an innate affinity for wild creature.

References

Wilson, E.O. 1984. *Biophilia*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press 157 pp.