

Field guides as a gateway to appreciating more-than-human concerns

For one of us (Ian), it is *Newcomb's Wildflower Guide*. For the other, it is *Les Punaises Pentatomoidea de France*, a guide to shieldbugs. If you spend time studying natural history, or even if you are a more casual naturalist, the book that you find most indispensable may well be a nature-manual, as it is for each of us.

The ostensible primary purpose of such books is to allow the quick identification of wild organisms. For many, unfortunately, this remains their only significant use. The two of us, however, have drawn (on different sides of the Atlantic) the same additional major benefit. Against a background of ongoing deep-green study, we have found that accentuating the experience of walking in wild places with the information in these books has done something remarkable. Out of objects it has forged subjects, subjects that are imbued with meaning and value and that have independent concerns.

Through this shift, our own worlds have changed. New relationships and value centres have become evident everywhere. And the realization has followed that we, too, are part of the immense and integrated new whole.

Beyond mere facts

We certainly do not wish to imply that field guides are essential for forming a good relationship within nature. Freya Mathews, for instance, has described a “sense of inner affinity with the natural world” that arose in her independently of any detailed empirical knowledge base (Mathews, 2019: 16). But we do challenge the contention of John Fowles (2000: 48; emphasis added) that “nature-manuals [...] may teach you how and what to look for, what to question in external nature; but never in your own nature.”

More broadly, we wish to champion field guides as tools for learning more than mere facts. Because, hopefully, at some point after a name and the corresponding ecological notes are absorbed, a more spiritual acquaintanceship may arise. Its cradle: an appreciation that all the individuals that comprise a named species are important both in their own right and as part of a greater whole. This is an appreciation that probably would not arise as strongly, we believe, if you knew nothing about names or ecology but just that there were *x* species in a particular area. And here's the funny thing: You don't even need to observe individuals of the species in question to derive such a benefit, or at least a partial one, from the guide. Just knowing that you are walking in their habitat can be enough.

Following paths

The relationships within the newly discovered whole – the ecosphere – offer many fascinating paths, if you are open to them. One's initial field of interest broadens out to cover the part of the Earth available to them. Suddenly one needs to learn about bumblebees because one has been seen forcing their way into a jewelweed. Wow, a whole new field! Why are there no dandelions here? Oh, damn, these pesky mosquitoes must be encouraged! The frog songs are wonderful here, but why are there fewer calling? Which species are declining?

On such journeys, field guides offer a window into local-scale diversity, connections, complexity and beauty, and there follows an inevitable conclusion: Everything intertwines. And thus, gradually, one realizes that all life is one's equal. ■

Ian Whyte
and **Joe Gray**

About the authors

Ian and Joe are field naturalists based, respectively, in Ottawa, ON, Canada, and St Albans, UK. Both are Associate Editors of the Journal.

Citation

Whyte I and Gray J (2020) Field guides as a gateway to appreciating more-than-human concerns. *The Ecological Citizen* 3: 119.

Keywords

Becoming ecocentric; ecological empathy; nature

References

- Fowles J (2000) *The Tree*. Vintage, London, UK.
- Lupoli R and Dusoulier F (2015) *Les Punaises Pentatomoidea de France*. Éditions Ancycrosoma, Fontenay-sous-Bois, France.
- Mathews F (2019) A responsive world: Personal reflections. *The Ecological Citizen* 2(Suppl A): 15–19.
- Newcomb L (1977) *Newcomb's Wildflower Guide*. Little, Brown and Company, Boston, MA, USA.