

The 1 Percent Naturalist

It is said that the Duke of Cumberland once complimented the British playwright Samuel Foote with the following bouquet: "Mr. Foote, I swallow all the good things you say."

"Indeed, sir," replied Mr. Foote, "then Your Royal Highness has an excellent digestion, for you never bring any of it up again."

Recently I found myself lodging a similar complaint with the readers of "The Enrichment," a column I write from time to time in the *B.C. Naturalist*. After nearly a decade of writing into what had often seemed a vacuum, the time had come to ask: Was anybody listening? Had anybody heard me say, yes or no, that naturalists ought to pay closer attention to the little things of this world?

Over the years I have repeated this admonition, in various guises, more times than a birdwatcher has sunflower seeds. Yet for all that, the BC naturalist community seems to me no more "enriched" in 1994 than it was in 1984, when my column premiered.

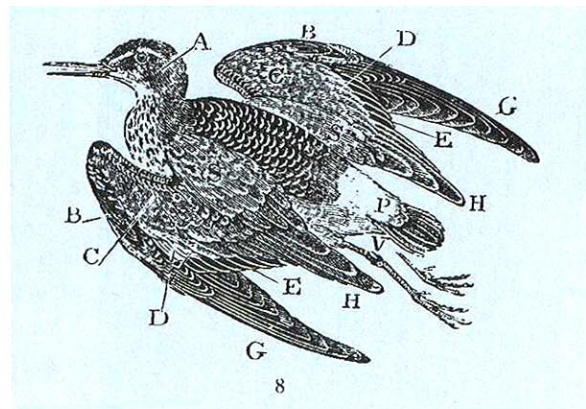
This impression was confirmed by a thumb-through of back issues of the *B.C. Naturalist*. Tokenism aside, the same old themes cropped up issue after issue, year after year: birds, wildflowers, birds, wetlands, birds, weeds, birds, whales, and birds, birds, birds.

While our naturalist preoccupations seem to have changed little over the past decade, Canadian societal values have changed rather a lot. Somehow, for example, old-growth forests aren't quite as decadent as they used to be. Nor are varmints, on the whole, quite as varminty.

Even the sacred term "wildlife" now officially encompasses not only the 1 percent of animals you can eat, but also the 99 percent of plants and animals (including wolf spiders, slime molds, liverworts and, of course, lichens) utterly unworthy of the privilege. Will the meek finally inherit the earth?

I doubt it, but at least it's encouraging to see them invited to the reading of the will.

Given this impressive broadening of conservation mandates, one wonders why naturalists haven't similarly broadened their knowledge mandates. By definition, naturalists are—or ought to be—caring knowers. But where are the caring knowers of wolf spiders and ladybugs, of slime molds and lichen crusts, of liverworts and freshwater algae? Where are the local experts on bracket fungi and pondweeds, on molluscs



and geometrid moths? The answer is simple: they're out watching birds.

I hope I may be forgiven for pointing out that birdwatching, for all its merits, is something of a mixed blessing. For though the watching of feathered lizards has recruited tens of thousands into the naturalist fold, it has also continuously distracted attention from other living things perhaps more in need of being watched. On balance, we are certainly better off with birdwatchers than without them. But even Roger Tory Peterson would (and does) admit there are other things to study.

Perhaps it comes down to this: naturalists, no less than the rest of humanity, are addicted to the obvious and the flashy. As in the shopping mall, so in the forest. Demonstrate this to yourself by checking off in your mind the number of songbirds you can identify. Now repeat the same exercise for lichens. I rest my case.

Do we actually believe, as the binoculars dangling from our necks would seem to suggest, that songbirds are somehow more "real" than lichens? I hope not. Value judgments of this sort are not only sheer biological illiteracy, they are unbecoming of naturalists. Better to recognize that everything living has descended from a long and remarkable tradition of close calls and epic escapes. Better to admit that life at whatever scale is a miracle worthy of attention.

If there is opportunity in the present declining state of world affairs, surely it is, as David Suzuki has pointed out, to reorient our personal and social priorities to greater balance with the natural world that supports us. Achieving this balance, however, will require new and deeper allegiances to all living things, not just the obvious and flashy.

In 1994, it is no longer enough for 99 percent of Canada's naturalists to focus on 1 percent of this country's biodiversity. There is simply too much at stake. Given society's admittedly periodic, but ultimately growing concern for the maintenance of biodiversity, the time has come for us to accept the one role it is given to naturalists alone to play: to monitor, in full living detail, the well being of the forests, fields, rivers, and lakes around us.

Goodbye, 1 percent naturalist. Hello, 100 percent naturalist.

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Trevor Goward is not a 100 percent naturalist, but is trying hard. He makes his home in the Clearwater Valley of south-central British Columbia, where he studies mushrooms, lichens, mosses, liverworts, vascular plants, birds, animal tracks, clouds, weather, snow, bioclimatic zonation, vulcanism, and, from time to time, other naturalists.