

A Hundred and One Natural History Books That You Should Read Before You Die

2. Henry Walter Bates' *The Naturalist on the River Amazons: A Record of Adventures, Habits of Animals, Sketches of Brazilian and Indian Life, and Aspects of Nature under the Equator, during Eleven Years of Travel*

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Continuing our “tropical” theme from the previous column, I would like to recommend the reader’s attention to Henry Walter Bates’ *The Naturalist on the River Amazons*. My edition is University of California Press, 1962, but there are many printings, including a free on-line Google facsimile of the original. First published in 1863, the title pretty much says it all. Bates was a wonderful self-taught naturalist with a particular passion for butterflies (you probably already know him for “Batesian Mimicry,” which describes the tendency for a harmless species to mimic the warning signals of a harmful species), but he was interested in everything and everyone. Bates originally traveled to the Amazons (he always referred to the river in the plural in recognition of its many tributaries and branches) with Alfred Russell Wallace, who we will discuss in a later column. The two naturalists’ originally planned to collect together, but they soon parted company, focusing on different taxa and different areas for Natural History investigations. As much as I love Wallace,

I feel that Bates is far and away the better storyteller of the pair, with a keen eye for landscapes, species, and peoples. Unlike the much shyer Wallace, Bates immediately threw himself into the culture of the Amazons, painting a largely sympathetic portrait of the locals who assisted him in his travels. He delights in the odd and the interesting, but also does not hesitate to give us details on the more mundane aspects of travel in tropical regions and recounts his many adventures in a modest yet engaging style that leaves this reader itching to go and see for himself. The scale of Bates’ contribution to tropical Natural History can perhaps be appreciated when one realizes that he collected over 8 *thousand* previously undescribed species during his travels. In *The Naturalist* one gets the real flavor of how this was done: the discomfort of narrow canoes, the encounters with alligators and giant spiders, drinking burning rum around a campfire while waiting for jaguars, and above all else the sheer fun and intense joy of seeing new things in new places through eyes of a

keen observer and master storyteller. You can get a good deal from just “dipping” here and there into this lovely book, but you owe it to yourself to read it cover to cover. Bates eventually returned to Britain to modest acclaim, and spent the rest of his life working for the Royal Geographical Society and classifying his extensive collections. (He was twice elected President of the Entomological Society of London.) He died in 1892, and it is a real shame that he has largely dropped out of

recognition among present-day natural historians. In terms of writing alone, he belongs in any naturalist’s library. For any of us who have dreamed of great rivers moving through dense jungle (or who have been lucky enough to actually go there), *The Naturalist on the River Amazons* is an absolute “must read.”

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