

Butterflies on the Roof of the World: A Memoir. Peter Smetacek. Aleph Book Company, 7/16, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi 110 002. 2012. 224 pp. Price: Rs 495.

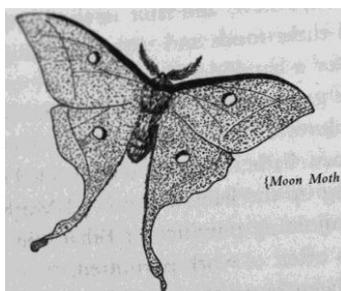
Western wildlife researchers have a remarkable tradition of publishing popular accounts of their studies in book form. *Innocent Killers* by Jane and Hugo Van Lawick-Goodall is an outstanding example. They even personify their subjects. Indian counterparts have, however, been content with scientific journals and occasional popular articles in mass media. We also have more than enough field-guides covering major groups of organisms. But amidst the gloss (or matt!) of coffee-table volumes with real photographs of our wilderness, natural history has rarely come to us as more real than fiction. Most of us are left day-dreaming with these mesmerizing photographs sprawled in front of us. But we are deprived of hairs standing on end, of lumps in the throat, of smiles to ourselves while we read on. For much of the last century, however, this void remained unfelt thanks mainly to the legendary Jim Corbett. With the latest arrival on the natural history stands – *Butterflies on the Roof of the World: A Memoir*, this void suddenly becomes conspicuous. And what a coincidence that the author, Peter Smetacek, comes from and writes about landscape made famous by Jim Corbett! Nevertheless, his adventures have taken him far beyond Kumaon and Garhwal Himalayas: right from a hut to be bulldozed the next morning in Nepal to the head of a dining table at Oxford.

But, of course, this speaks little of Smetacek's extraordinary ventures that led him onto crumbling ledges across

cliffs overhanging vast empty spaces – just to be in time to discover an isolated colony of a tiny butterfly, the Golden Sapphire. And still little of the hours spent in attracting moths on his own lawn, in his own verandah. That is why he feels that 'having nothing urgent to do is one of the prerequisites for observing nature'. People often deride the leisurely pace and long stares of wildlifers. Similarly, following anything less than a large carnivore is often looked down upon even by some wildlife biologists. But the opening tale of this book provides a glimpse into a life full of adrenaline pumped up by so innocuous creatures as butterflies. This book might rest in your book-case for most of the time; you might still carry an identification guide to the field; but you will certainly chase butterflies with a renewed vision after reading this book.

One cannot choose what to receive in inheritance; this man got forests – both on land and in blood. Darwin emphasized that he wrote his short autobiography for his grandchildren to read. Here, this man nourished the dream to emulate his grandfather and father. With a strange mix of genes and environ, he has succeeded in doing that and much more. He has paid a graceful tribute to this inheritance tracing his roots from Sude-teland to Bhimtal in the initial stories. He has a knack to trace the history and has done that often in this book. Incidentally, he seems to have inherited the Jim Corbett style of story-telling with gripping narratives and thrilling climaxes. His memoirs are as much of his butterflies as his own. And he is not blinded by butterflies; he has a keen eye for every creature around.

Scattered among the tales of beauty and splendour, there are purely scientific insights, albeit explained in a simple language. Contrary to most people who just wonder at the intriguing phenomenon of mimicry among butterflies, Smetacek has moved on to test the palatability



hypothesis behind it. As a result, he has come up with a new kind of mimicry and is still gathering more evidence to prove it. He wonders why the highly successful mimicry of dry leaf was not widespread. Apparently, he too is struggling with the biggest dilemma of our times in which a nagging doubt holds us back from fully accepting the theory of evolution. He speculates that butterflies might possess more than mere instinct. His major contribution, though, is advancing the science of using butterflies as indicators of forest-health and other environmental conditions. According to him, this is the ultimate application of all the effort invested in taxonomy and field studies on butterflies (and moths, of course). This reminded me of the legendary E. H. Aitken, who called butterflies 'weather prophets' for their immaculate ability to predict the arrival of monsoon.

Smetacek has a certain blend of humour in his style throughout. This is quite evident when he writes about drunken moths and havoc wreaked by so-called poisonous honey. The humour gets a grey lining when he is branded human-trafficker catching 'butterflies' – an euphemism used by notorious criminals for young Nepali girls.

We should be thankful too. In the shameless race to put our names in every possible place, he has tactfully reminded us of people who wish to remain nameless despite immense contributions to natural history. Are there also people who discover new species only to name them after family members?

The conspicuous absence of photographs marks this book out. And his beautiful sketches – along with an attractive front cover – have certainly matched the stories. I would, however, like to point out a slight slip when he mentions coincidence of Bates' studies in South America (1848–58) and Darwin's writing up of the theory of evolution. Darwin had formed his theory as early as 1844. He has himself mentioned this in the historical sketch in *Origin of Species*.

To share the pure joy it gave me, I have already started gifting this book to friends. It is worth it.

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