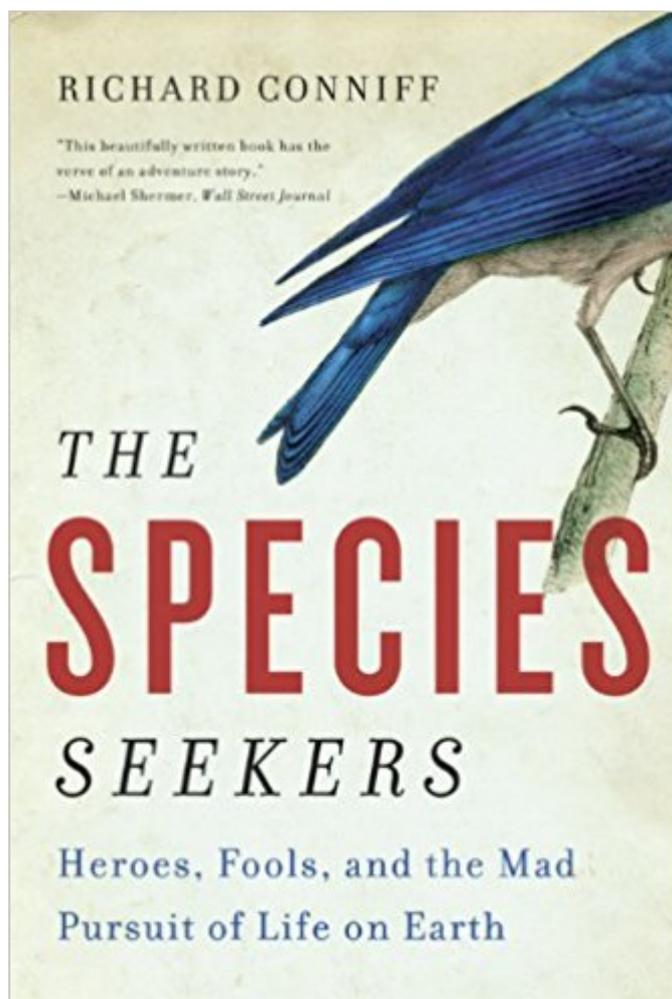


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The Species Seekers: Heroes, Fools, And The Mad Pursuit Of Life On Earth



Synopsis

The story of bold adventurers who risked death to discover strange life forms in the farthest corners of planet Earth. Beginning with Linnaeus, a colorful band of explorers made it their mission to travel to the most perilous corners of the planet and bring back astonishing new life forms. They attracted followers ranging from Thomas Jefferson, who laid out mastodon bones on the White House floor, to twentieth-century doctors who used their knowledge of new species to conquer epidemic diseases. Acclaimed science writer Richard Conniff brings these daredevil "species seekers" to vivid life. Alongside their globe-spanning tales of adventure, he recounts some of the most dramatic shifts in the history of human thought. At the start, everyone accepted that the Earth had been created for our benefit. We weren't sure where vegetable ended and animal began, we couldn't classify species, and we didn't understand the causes of disease. But all that changed as the species seekers introduced us to the pantheon of life on Earth—and our place within it.

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Customer Reviews

I am very impressed with conniff and writing style. I would recommend all his natural history books

The author has really done his homework, digging up fascinating facts about some of the world's truly colorful scientists and wanna-be scientists who, for better or worse, led the way to discoveries big and small of the natural world. The book is interesting from start to finish. I highly recommend it to anyone with an interest in the history of human discovery.

Excellent book explaining the necessity of species seekers and the risks that fellow seekers have taken to gain a better understanding of the natural world

Love this book! Used it in my high school biology class.

He was delighted with the subject matter as a gift read. My guess is this is good armchair "travel" adventure for my dear retiree.

Very good history

Great Book. I really enjoyed it. I had read about some of the seekers. But others I knew very little. This book is really worth reading

A 464 page tome that attempts to cover the eage of discovery of new taxa since Linnaeus should probably be forgiven for its omissions: I have had a little trouble doing so, although (in the end) I have to admit I think this book is a wonderful account, spellbinding at times, that contains lots of information that was new to me. The book is really a series vignettes focusing on individual scientists from the late 18th Century down to our own. They were picked to demonstrate the many challenges that confront species seekers in every facet of their endeavor. Many themes weave through the book: the principal one, perhaps, is how Science "perhaps better described as "Natural History" became a passionate pursuit of many middle and upper class men (and women) in the late 18 and 19th Centuries. This passion was fueled by the exciting discovery of new taxa. Starting with Linnaeus, whom Conniff paints with an expressionistic brush "acknowledging his achievement (and providing the context for that achievement), while dwelling rather lovingly and at length on Linnaeus' sometimes grandiloquent personality: we get quite the laundry list demonstrating his robust egotism. The theme of how much the need for the expression of personality "and advancing one's career

(often at the expense of others), forms one of the leitmotifs of the book. Seeking species is apparently not just about expanding the knowledge of Mankind so much as it is a product of individuals grappling with the unknown—often obsessively, but using discovery to further their personal agenda. After Linnaeus, Conniff focuses much of the book on a cluster of interactions between competing scientists. For instance: John James Audubon, Constantine Rafinesque, Alexander Wilson whose interactions make for compelling reading as each seeks to beat the other in acquiring new bird taxa in the rapidly disappearing American wilderness. The specter of Charles Ord provides the mold for “closet naturalist” dark antagonist in the book—who as President of the Philadelphia Academy of Sciences exerts all his powers to thwart Audubon and Thomas Say among others. The role of evil bureaucrat is assumed in Britain a few decades later by John E. Gray, keeper of Zoology at the British Museum who does everything he can to thwart the careers of the likes of William Bates, Alfred Russell Wallace and other field biologists whose accomplishments he belittles while pluming his nest with their specimens. The obstacles, frustrations and failures of naturalists is yet another theme running through the book: Conniff seems to relish relating the manner in which scientists suffer and often expire in the field. He even adds a five page “Necrology” as a sort of appendix to the book which lists how over 70 scientists met an untimely death in pursuit of their work. The list is far from complete—gleaning through it I noticed Reginald Farrer, the monumental botanist of China who died on a plant hunting expedition in Borneo, is missing as is Captain James Cook who died in battle with Hawaiians. Cook’s explorations throughout the Pacific were focused in large part on scientific exploration. I sought in vain for his name... The book is largely focused on Zoology—the very heart of the book recounts the complex relationship of Darwin and Alfred Russell Wallace, and their co-discovery of evolution—showing how and why Darwin came away with most of the recognition for that discovery. The complex drama surrounding the discovery of the great primates—chimpanzees at first, but the even greater drama surrounding the finding and naming of gorillas—comprise another major set-piece of the book, with many lurid digressions that explore the deep layers of racism that characterize those times. And perhaps our’s. The final chapters are more rushed: the vast exploration of China in the 19th century is glossed over, or rather, concentrated in a single chapter on Pere David, the unstoppable French monk whose extraordinary zeal and accomplishment was just the beginning of exploration in the Eastern Himalayas: Pierre Jean Marie Delavay, his fellow countryman and peer, barely gets a mention. And what of Augustine Henry? George Forrest? Frank Kingdon Ward? Frank Meyer? The what of the dozens of other explorers who risked life and limb and brought back tens of thousands of

specimens from the same region? They were primarily botanists, or horticulturists. David's story will have to encapsulate their vast drama. Just as Walter Rothschild understandably takes center stage later in this book: his Gargantuan amassing of zoological collections have been wonderfully described by Miriam Rothschild, his niece's chapter on Walter is basically a Reader's Digest condensation of that book and he does manage a mention of Charles Rothschild whose discovery of the rat flea (*Xenopsylla cheopsis*) did, after all, provide the key to the bubonic plague. But what about Lionel Rothschild? He was apparently not worth mentioning since he was enormously successful not just as Banker but as a politician (he was the first Jewish member of Parliament, and even ran (and won) unopposed for his seat in subsequent elections.) But as the creator of Exbury, one of the grandest of British gardens. He was a key member of the Syndicate who funded the explorations of many of the leading biologists who collected herbarium specimens and seed throughout China in the 19th and early 20th Century. A large percentage of the Chinese flora was named from these expeditions, and many plants described from Exbury. But horticultural exploration which funded many of the most productive expeditions barely merits mention in the book. Hardly worth the mention, perhaps. The final chapters are focused on Medicine particularly the search for the cause of Malaria and Yellow Fever: although the discovery of new species is not so much a focus here as the discovery of the biology of these species, and how they interact with other organisms the collaborative drama of these chapters and the personal dramas of the protagonists are spellbinding reading. It's worth reading the book for this section alone. Although it is perhaps an adumbration of how species seeking has been utterly eclipsed by the Laboratory, or the "Gene Jockies" of the present day. The book brilliantly underscores how millions of lives have depended on the discoveries of the species seekers and every corner of our lives has been touched by them. Despite the inevitable omissions, this is a wonderful book, written with flair that makes for a compelling read. I believe any intelligent reader would become absorbed by it and learn a great deal: I certainly have!

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