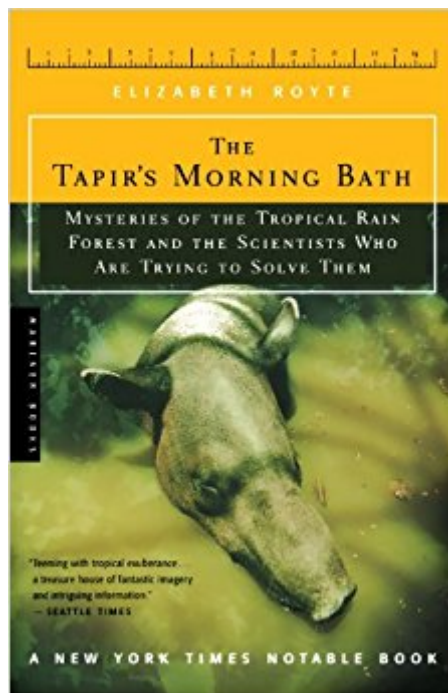




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The Tapir's Morning Bath: Solving The Mysteries Of The Tropical Rain Forest



Synopsis

An engaging portrait of a community of biologists, *The Tapir's Morning Bath* is a behind-the-scenes account of life at a tropical research station that "conveys the uncertainties, frustrations, and joys of [scientific] field work" (Science). On Panama's Barro Colorado Island, Elizabeth Royte works alongside the scientists -- counting seeds, sorting insects, collecting monkey dung, radiotracking fruit bats -- as they struggle to parse the intricate workings of the tropical rain forest. While showing the human side of the scientists at work, Royte explores the tensions between the slow pace of basic research and the reality of a world that may not have time to wait for answers.

Book Information

Paperback: 336 pages

Publisher: Mariner Books (November 4, 2002)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0618257586

ISBN-13: 978-0618257584

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.6 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 15 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #653,635 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #151 in [Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Forests & Rainforests](#) #290 in [Books > Science & Math > Agricultural Sciences > Forestry](#) #922 in [Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Natural Resources](#)

Customer Reviews

While researching this book, Royte spent a year living and working intermittently with the ardent rainforest researchers on Barrow Colorado Island in the Panama Canal. A contributing writer to *Outside* magazine, Royte deftly describes these researchers and their work as well as the historical research done on the island and the history of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, which serves as a base camp for researchers on the island. Through stories about spider monkeys, tent-making bats, leaf-cutting ants, spiny rats, innumerable bugs, and even the movement of water in the ecosystem, Royte offers an excellent overview of the need for tropical research. She also discusses the decline of the generalist in the field of biology. Books like Marty Crump's *In Search of the Golden Frog* (LJ 5/15/00) and Margaret Lowman's *Life in the Treetops* (LJ 5/15/99) focus on the life-work of one particular scientist (Lowman includes a chapter on her own work on Barrow

Colorado), while Royte combines the studies of many researchers, resulting in an introduction to the ecosystem. An excellent book for all libraries. Margaret Henderson, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Lib. and Archives, NY Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"Intriguing . . . a finely drawn chronicle of fieldwork, with an appealing moral edge." Kirkus Reviews"Excellent . . . a superb introduction to tropical ecology and theoretical biology, as well as original and thoroughly engaging travel writing." Publishers Weekly"Royte is a remarkable writer . . . a perfect guide. The book is a charmer; I loved it." The New York Times Book Review"An excellent overview of the need for tropical research . . . an excellent book for all libraries." Library Journal"By turns comic and poetic, delivers the pleasures of a meandering excursion . . . the act of observing is its own reward." The New Yorker"Elizabeth Royte's book represents a moving and satisfying step forward in nature writing." Providence Journal --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

A fascinating book written by a talented science writer. The book engages, teaches, and entertains while pulling us into the lives the writer and the scientists about whom she is writing. Anyone who loves the tropics, science, human nature, or the intersection of the three will appreciate this lively writing.

The Tapir's Morning Bath by Elizabeth Royte is an interesting look at the world of field biologists working in the American tropics. The author spent about a year living and working with scientists at a scientific station that was located on Barro Colorado Island (often abbreviated as BCI), an isle that rises steeply from near the middle of Gatun Lake, the enormous midsection of the Panama Canal. Isolated by the waters of the Chagres River (dammed in 1910 to form the canal), BCI was once the highest peak of the now submerged Loma de Palenquilla range. Its summit rises 119 meters above the lake's surface and covers some 1,564 hectares or about 6 square miles. The Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI) runs a lab on the island's northeastern shore, a facility that has operated continuously since 1923, its backyard the most-studied tropical rain forest in the world. The preservation of the island and the lab was the brainchild of James Zetek, a U.S. Department of Agriculture entomologist who had been working on mosquito control in the Canal Zone during its construction. The island is a nearly ideal laboratory for researchers. It is home to 65 terrestrial mammal species (including agoutis, peccaries, deer, sloths, howler monkeys, anteaters, tayras, and

tapirs), 70 bat species, 381 bird species, 58 species of reptiles (including crocodiles), 32 amphibian species, and 1,369 species of vascular plants, including 300 tree species. The animals are reached by a series of maintained trails and some are so well studied that good population figures are had for a number of species (there are about 2,500 agoutis on the island for instance). In order to ease her way into the island residents' culture and also to get a handle on both what life is like as a field biologist and what it was they were studying, Royte volunteered to be a free field assistant to anyone who wanted her. At first the scientists were reluctant but soon she was eagerly sought by a variety of researchers. The heart of the book is really her work in the field with these biologists, describing both what they were studying and the field biologists themselves, what motivated them, what they hoped to achieve, and their views on both their research subjects and larger issues in science. One scientist she spent a lot of time in the field with was Chrissy Campbell, who was doing a study of spider-monkeys. Her study a difficult one, requiring her to follow the island's one spider-monkey troop all day until it bedded down at 6pm and then be back in the field at 6am to follow it again (if she was late she had to spend all day locating it and was often not successful). She sought to collect fecal samples from the troop's five adult females and record their behavior, hoping that analysis of the samples in the lab and correlation with the behaviors she recorded would reveal information on female hormones, adult behavior, and the relationship between the two. Another scientist she worked with was Bret Weinstein, who was doing a study of tent making in bats. This behavior (which consisted of a bat biting and bending leaves into shapes to conceal and protect them as they slept) was noted to have evolved three separate times among bats and was found only among small, canopy fruit eating bats of the American tropics. Weinstein hoped to discover the reasons behind the tent-making, a job that kept him up all hours of the night, running through the jungle at night chasing faint signals on radio transmitters he attached to some of his study subjects. She was field assistant to Paul Trebe, himself a field assistant to a scientist who was back at his university in the U.S. His laborious daily job was to visit scores of traps every morning on BCI and on several small adjacent islands (one island had 99 traps) for the nocturnal spiny rat, collecting information on that species population size, age structure, sex ratio, and reproductive output, which along with manipulating conditions on some of the small islands enabled the scientist back home to do complicated studies that impacted on such issues as the animal's role in seed dispersal and as a reservoir for infectious agents. Other researchers Royte worked with included a geologist studying the forest's effects on runoff and the canal watershed, two scientists doing a diversity study of lianas, and a researcher studying the effects of leaf-cutter ants on tree growth. While in the field and talking to the island's residents, Royte noted that there was a rivalry between

field biologists and those who worked in laboratories. Field scientists often had a "working-class pride," and "cultivated a spunky disdain for lab jocks." She said that pure animal-behavior studies were "decidedly out of fashion in these molecular times" and was perceived by many as a "soft" science. Many on the island griped that molecular biologists got the lion's share of money and prestige, though some did acknowledge they provided useful insights (particularly in the area of taxonomy). Royte pondered the often incredibly narrow focus of researchers there, joking once that she "damned tropical biology as a black-art discipline and scientists as high priests of esoterica." Sometimes researchers labored on projects that seemed to have little application and gained deep knowledge about very narrow aspects of an organism but were often "ignorant of the whole." Royte wrote that the increasing number of scientists and decreasing amounts of funding available (consumed partially by huge university bureaucracies) forced scientists to specialize early, to carve out a niche that no else had in order to "avoid competition and make names for themselves." She also noted that sometimes seemingly very arcane research results can yield surprising answers to larger puzzles. A very good book, I enjoyed her descriptions, the obvious research she did, and a subject she came back to repeatedly in the book, why tropical rain forests are so diverse.

Let me say first of all that I am a layman who is a science buff. My education is in Psychology, but I love biology, neuroscience, physics, and related topics. Tapir's Bath looked like an entertaining way to cram more about creature behavior into my brain. Actually you end up learning not an awful lot about the behavior of animals in the wild, but you do get an education about the behavior of scientists in the wild. While most primates, man included, are social animals, scientists seem to be loners like members of the cat family. They often are reclusive, enticed to be social only by the promise of a party that offers booze and food. Territorially jealous they form caste systems that allow them to sneer at other specialties. They grumble about cell biologists that sit in nice warm laboratories while they have to plow through muck and rain, bitten by a variety of small insects. Oh yes, and the microbiologists get all of the public attention, and the research funding. The public just doesn't seem to care about the distance a bat flies to obtain food. The science bits are quite interesting, but not comprehensive enough to add much to your knowledge of biology. But that doesn't matter. The scientists on Barro Colorado Island deserve a lot of credit for their painstaking, difficult, uncomfortable research. I was interested in reading about their field research while being thankful that I majored in a subject that keeps me indoors where my biggest environmental problem is getting the thermostat adjusted correctly. Elizabeth Royte also proves that science writers often have to endure hardships. Pregnant during some of her long stay on Barro Colorado, she also

trekked through rain and mud, returning to base to rest in bed and meditate on the cockroaches climbing her walls. It's a fun book.

For anyone who treasures the work of wildlife researchers, and wants to peek into their often difficult but always fascinating lives, this book is for you. Written in a way that captures her audience from the beginning, like a chat over food rather than a scientific presentation, this book will teach you while it entertains you. It makes you feel the heat and humidity, and allows you to share the frustrations and the joys.

This is a really good book! I'm a biologist and I'm currently in Panama and I've spent the last couple of years in Central America. I can assure you that this is an excellent work about biologists, research, and life in Central America. The writing is straight ahead, no flourishes or flounces to get in the way. The story is simple but clear and funny and heartwarming. I don't know what more you can ask for in a book. The BCI Research Station is one of the last great centers for basic research into topical ecology. While it is being taken over, gradually, by biologists who know everything about what's going on inside the cell wall but cannot tell a Red Deer from a Bulldog, there are still enough who are trying to understand what animals and plants are doing and what is the relationship between them. Whether you intend to travel to the rain forest or not, this is a good read and you will enjoy it. I did and I highly recommend it.

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