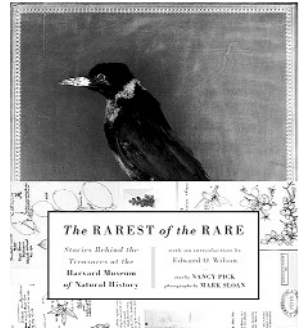


# ABOUT BOOKS

## Some Natural History History

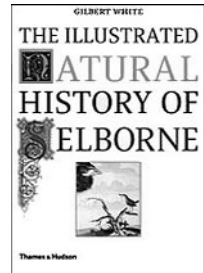
*Mark Lynch*

**The Rarest of the Rare: The Stories Behind the Treasures at the Harvard Museum of Natural History.** Text by Nancy Pick and photographs by Mark Sloan. 2004. HarperCollins Publishers Inc. New York.



**The Illustrated Natural History of Selborne.** Gilbert White. 2004. Thames and Hudson. London.

“I seldom go into a natural history museum without feeling as if I were attending a funeral.” John Burroughs, American essayist and naturalist.



I confess openly to having been a natural history geek as a child and a teen. Now I fully embrace the often-derogatory moniker “geek,” wear the title proudly, and fully own up to everything it implies. But in high school it was quite another thing entirely. While other adolescents were out playing football, listening to the Beatles, sipping their first brew, and getting to second base with that field hockey player, I was wandering the dark, over-stuffed galleries of the Museum of Comparative Zoology in genuine rapture and awe. To bear witness to that overwhelming diversity of life past and present that was on display there was to experience the nirvana of natural history and evolution. Yes, I achieved satori while staring at the articulated bones of a kronosaurus and contemplating a tall jar of tapeworms.

But exciting as it was, shuffling through those museum galleries with the creaking wooden floors and sleepy guards was not enough for me; I needed to see some of those wonders of life for myself. So I took my passion for the natural world out of the museum and spent as many hours enjoying wildlife firsthand along the banks of the upper Charles River where I lived. Even in that most urban of riparian wilds, monstrous antediluvian snapping turtles could be found lumbering out of the water to lay eggs, and I could be dumbstruck by the last runs of spawning smelt and herring.

Years passed. I left Watertown, and I learned that playing Frisbee, listening to Jimi Hendrix, and imbibing in substances other than brew while having a wild affair with a theater arts major was a helluva lot more fun than anything that went on with those other jocks in high school. Still, despite the veneer of being hip that came with reaching adulthood in the late 60s, I was definitely still a nature geek at heart, and (no surprise!) I still am today. It was that particular combination of experiences in both a museum and in the field that made me the passionate natural historian that I am today.

Recently, two books have been published that celebrate these two focuses of interest for the naturalist: the collection of a great museum, and the joys of nature found in your local patch.

For the slice of time they preserve in human events, we visit battlefields and historical monuments. For panoramas of contemporary life-forms, we travel to zoos, botanical gardens and wildlife reserves. For knowledge of science and the humanities, we go to libraries and art galleries. And for all of the above, we visit natural history museums. Edward O. Wilson, in his introduction to *The Rarest of the Rare*.

The passion for assembling and exhibiting unique collections of oddities dates back to the tradition of the *Wunderkammer* [German for “wonder cabinet”] in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Rich collectors would finance expeditions to exotic and far-flung locales of the newly explored globe, ventures charged with bringing back the most unusual skins of birds and mammals, odd-looking insects, and strange formations of minerals. The creatures that were the most rare, and the most bizarre, were those the most cherished, especially if no one else owned something similar. These “objects de nature” would not be exhibited in any systematic fashion, but arranged “aesthetically” in odd groupings, all the better to inspire awe and wonder in the viewer (and hopefully a bit of jealousy for the wealth and connections of the collector too). The purpose of these collections was not to further understand nature, but rather to gaze in bewilderment at all the arcane forms nature took. Even human anatomical specimens were given this artistic treatment. Nothing spoke of a patron of the arts’ power and intellect better than exhibiting a surreal assemblage of organs, skeletons, and calculi preserved by Dutch anatomist and artist Frederick Ruysch. He used bits of preserved fetuses, organs, and even other creatures to create original sculptures that often had a “memento mori” moral to them. One of Ruysch’s pieces included a skeleton playing a fiddle made of a sequestrum [fragment of dead bone separated from healthy bone as a result of an injury or a disease], with the bow made from an injected and preserved artery. In another piece, a uterus, complete with illegitimate fetus was displayed with the label: “Fish may be found in pools where one least suspects them.”

With the coming of the Scientific Revolution and the taxonomy of Linnaeus, these collections of oddities became organized along more systematic schemes and were more often associated with leading universities. Harvard University’s first scientific collection began in the 1790s, when it established its Mineralogical Cabinet. In *The Rarest of the Rare*, journalist and staff writer for the Harvard Museum of Natural History, Nancy Pick recounts the highs and lows of the long history of this venerable institution and the gradual amassing of its collection of twenty-one million specimens of “animal, vegetable and mineral—from every imaginable part of the earth” (p. 7). This is not a dull story by any means, and the history of the Harvard Museum includes several downright strange events like a horrifying murder with dismemberment and an amusing, but deadly serious, living frog toss off the museum roof. It was Louis Agassiz who arrived at Harvard in 1848 with his “grand vision” to turn Harvard’s collection into a world-class museum. As Pick points out, though

Agassiz was a raving anti-Darwinist as well as a racist, his importance to the history of the museum cannot be overstated.

The Harvard Museum seems to have been a family interest. Louis' son, Alexander, was a philanthropist and oceanographer and, unlike his father, an acceptor of Darwin's theories. It was Alexander who, in the late 1800s, helped to really modernize the exhibitions at the museum, arranging specimens according to geographical regions or geological time periods. A photograph in the book of the museum from 1892 demonstrates Alexander Agassiz's new designs of the galleries and shows a room with a wonderful papier-mâché Giant Squid swimming over the exhibit cases. This photograph elicited a deep feeling of nostalgia in me because this was the museum I grew up with.

It seems surprising, but it was the 1953 discovery of the structure of DNA that led to a period of decline of the museum. The focus of the university became molecular biology, and the idea of a dusty collection of long-dead creatures seemed quaint and quite beside the point. After all, what can some moldy bird skin tell us, when we can now peer into the very genetic structure of that same bird? This shortsighted attitude only changed in the 1980s when professors like Edward O. Wilson began expounding on the importance of biodiversity. Like a veil lifting, it was realized that those millions of skins and specimens held the genetic history of life on this planet. The collection has thus become a treasure-trove for modern taxonomists seeking to trace the genetic links between species and better understand evolution and distribution of species. Finally, in the 1990s, a decision to make the public mission a priority brought the museum into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and this has encouraged many more new visitors to enjoy the grand tapestry of life on earth that the Harvard Museum has on display.

The real purpose of *The Rarest of the Rare* is not to just recount the Harvard Museum's colorful history, important and interesting as that is, but rather to expose to the light of day some of the real oddities that are tucked away in this vast collection, the bulk of which the public never sees. As Pick puts it:

Behind every specimen in this book is a good story. There are tales of wealthy explorers, obsessive collectors, bone hunters, mushroom seekers, and visionary scientists. The specimens themselves are immensely varied and appealing. They come from the farthest reaches of the globe, the deepest depths of the sea and even outer space. Some are beautiful (the tanagers, the gold). Others are intriguing (the dodo skeleton, the fossil of the gigantic dragonfly wing). Others are heartbreaking (the wolf pelt, the extinct butterfly). And still others are simply strange (the tapeworms from the digestive tracts of upper-crust Bostonians, the birdwing butterfly collected by a man later eaten by cannibals (p. 33).

Mark Sloan has sumptuously and lovingly photographed each of the specimens chosen for this book. Each photograph is accompanied by a lively text from Nancy Pick. Best of all, Pick has chosen some very entertaining specimens for the reader to behold. What birder can resist gazing at the delicate skin of the now extinct Mamo of

Hawaii taken on Captain James Cook's third and final voyage? Another section shows the namesake specimen of Lewis's Woodpecker taken in 1806 by Meriwether Lewis himself on the Clearwater River in what is now Idaho. Yes, the woodpecker is a bit the worse for wear, but imagine how it got here? In these pages are Great Auks, Carolina Parakeets, and an egg of the Elephant Bird. E.O. Wilson's vast but orderly holdings of neatly pinned ant specimens (to date he has named 337 species) vie for the reader's attention with author Vladimir Nabokov's more folksy and personal, but equally obsessive, collection of the genitalia of butterflies. (The author of *Lolita* claimed the minute genitalia were the only safe way to separate specimens of blues.) Here's a shell named after a Fanny, there a mastodon involved in a murder. On one page an extinct skink, on another Asa Gray's nemesis flower. There are fossil butterflies, giant turtles, and even magic mushrooms. You read this book like you visit the Harvard Museum: dashing from one display case to the next to see what new wonder you will find.

*The Rarest of the Rare* brings back some of the giddy sense of awe and wonder that spectators felt during the golden age of the *Wunderkammer* and combines it with a serious appreciation of a collection of the utmost scientific interest. Pick and Sloan have created a deeply entertaining celebration of an important chapter in the long and often odd record of scientific natural history.

To a person uninstructed in natural history, his country or sea-side stroll is a walk through a gallery filled with wonderful works of art, nine-tenths of which have their faces turned to the wall. Thomas Henry Huxley.

In the mid-1700s an unassuming Reverend living in the secluded and quiet English village of Selbourne wrote a book that has been remarkably influential to birders in England today. Natural historian James Fisher has described the Reverend Gilbert White as "the man who started us all birdwatching." John Eyre, in a recent issue of *British Birds*, describes the importance of this book:

There are few natural history books that can be described as classics, but Gilbert White's *The Natural History of Selbourne* surely ranks as one of the finest. Since its publication in 1789, it has rarely, if ever, been out of print and has appeared in almost 300 editions and reissues, qualifying it as one of the most published books in the English language (*British Birds* [97], July 2004, p. 360).

Though it is likely that any serious British birder knows this book well, it is a safe bet that most of you on THIS side of the Atlantic are scratching your collective heads at the moment mumbling something like, "Selbourne, where's that?" It's sadly true that many important books written in other countries, especially those that have a local flavor, have not been well received here. I would like to make a case that *The Illustrated Natural History of Selbourne* is an internationally important natural history book that deserves a wider American audience.

The Oxford-educated Reverend Gilbert White (1720-93) lived most of his life in the tiny rural village of Selbourne in Hampshire, England. Though he did travel

somewhat, he suffered horribly from what was called “coach sickness” in those days, and this restricted the amount of traveling he could do. A fortunate consequence of this pre-Dramamine malaise is that this encouraged him to look more closely at the area around his own neighborhood.

All the White brothers had a real interest in natural history, especially his brother Benjamin, who was a bookseller and publisher. Benjamin also traveled extensively and would send Gilbert his observations of migrants from abroad. In addition, Benjamin’s business put him in close contact with notable natural history authors of the day, and Benjamin in turn would put them in contact with Gilbert. In this way, the Reverend White built up a number of close correspondents to whom he could forward his observations of the natural world in Selbourne. The ensuing discussions helped to put those observations into a broader perspective. Two of these correspondents were the lawyer/naturalist, the Honourable Daines Barrington, and the famous zoologist, Thomas Pennant. Barrington had invented a form diary for nature notes called *The Naturalist’s Journal*, and he gave one to Gilbert White. White kept this journal until his death and used these recorded observations as the basis for extensive letters to Pennant and Barrington. It was these letters that became the foundation for the book *The Natural History of Selbourne*.

The book was finally published in 1789 as *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selbourne, In the County of Southampton: with Engravings, and an Appendix* in two parts. The first part, consisting of the natural history letters, was always more popular than the second part, a parish history of antiquities. The antiquities section was dropped from later editions of the book.

Through reading *The Natural History of Selbourne*, the world of the bucolic countryside of 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain comes alive in wondrous and meticulous detail. White is revealed to the reader as an enthusiastic, consistent, and careful observer of the natural world in his own backyard. He was a firm believer in fieldwork and firsthand observations of nature and had little patience with naturalists who remained locked up in museums poring over their collections of skins.

Faunists, as you observe, are too apt to acquiesce in bare descriptions, and a few synonyms: the reason is plain; because all that may be done at home in a man’s study, but the investigation of the life and conversation of animals, is a concern of much more trouble and difficulty, and is not to be attained but by the active and inquisitive, and by those that reside much in the country (p. 129).

White was passionate about observing the behavior of animals and was especially interested in bird migration. This was at a time when extremely little was understood about where birds went in the winter. Though White believed most birds did migrate south and out of Selbourne, he still held on to the ancient idea that swallows hibernated in the mud under ponds. Throughout his letters, you can see him struggling with trying to figure out what is really happening to certain species as the seasons change. He includes charts of the first dates in the year that migrant species appeared in Selbourne as well as complete details of those species that stayed to breed, and in

what habitat. White was fascinated by every aspect of a bird's habits and how those behaviors differed from other similar species.

I have discovered an anecdote with respect to the fieldfare (*turdus pilaris*), which I think is particular enough: this bird, though it sits in the trees in the daytime, and procures the greatest part of its food from the white-thorn hedges; yea, moreover, builds on very high trees; as may be seen by the *Fauna Suecica* ["Swedish Zoology" written by Linnaeus in 1746]; yet always appears with us to roost on the ground. They are seen to come in flocks just before it is dark, and to settle and nestle among the heath of our forest. And, besides, the larkers, in dragging their nets by night, frequently catch them in the wheat stubbles; while the bat-fowlers, who take many redwings in the hedges, never entangle any of this species. Why these birds, in the matter of roosting, should differ from all their congeners, and from themselves with respect to their proceedings by day, is a fact for which I am by no means able to account. (p. 76).

*The Natural History of Selbourne* is also of great interest as a snapshot of a study area very much in flux due to overwhelming social and political forces. During the time of White's observations, Britain was rapidly changing. The Industrial and Agricultural Revolutions were just underway; many new roads were being built, thus opening up access to areas previously wild. The last remaining open free land was being enclosed. All of these affected the distribution of the animals and birds. Politically, Britain was in a period of turmoil with wars with Spain, France, the Seven Years War (1756-62) and, of course, that little skirmish that ended up with the creation of an entity that we call the United States.

The White household and gardens have been restored and can be visited today. Though much of the surrounding countryside seems unchanged, the Honey Buzzards, Stone Curlews, Grasshopper Warblers, and several other species that White carefully described as nesting species are no longer to be found breeding in the area due to habitat changes that began in his time.

This version of White's masterpiece has been augmented by the addition of appropriate color illustrations from the British Library taken from various sources contemporary with White's journals. The overall effect is to make even livelier the extremely entertaining text. As of this writing, this handsome and sturdy paperback can only be purchased in Britain, but is easily available through the British Amazon.com

Any birder who has carefully written down in his journal some description of an interesting behavior that he has observed, or kept long-term consistent records of the changing fortunes of birds from some local patch, will find a kindred spirit in Gilbert White and an important and fascinating historic precedent in *The Illustrated Natural History of Selbourne*. 🐦

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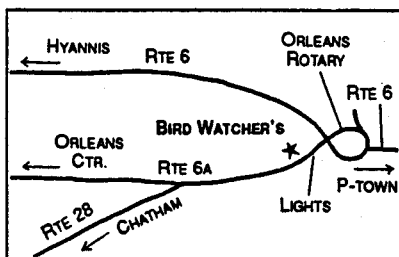
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