A Taxonomy of Nature Writing

"... this incomparably lande"
JEAN RIBAULT, *The Whole & True Discoverye of Terra Florida* (London, 1565)

If we first describe nature writing in quasi-taxonomic terms, that in a general way can help us see what is important about the genre and how its themes are developed. I must introduce a cautionary note, though, before laying out a proposed classification scheme of American nature literature: the types I have listed tend to intergrade, and with great frequency. This may be somewhat irritating to lovers of neatness who would like their categories to be immutable, but nature writing is not in truth a neat and orderly field. Nevertheless, we can make a few sound and, I hope, helpful generalizations. First and most fundamentally, the literature of nature has three main dimensions to it: natural history information, personal responses to nature, and philosophical interpretation of nature. The relative weight or interplay of these three aspects determines all the permutations and categories within the field. If conveying information is almost the whole intention, for example (see the left edge of the spectrum in the chart on p. 4), the writing in question is likely to be a professional paper or a field guide or handbook, most of which are only intermittently personal or philosophical and also, perhaps, literary only in spots. A good example is Roger Tory Peterson's *A Field Guide to Western Birds* (1961). The brief description of the canyon wren's song, among other little gems in the book, immediately suggests something more than just accuracy. "Voice: A gushing cadence of clear curved notes tripping down the scale." That single line may evoke the entire ambience of a shaded, slickrock canyon somewhere in the Southwest on a June morning. But few people would expect a field guide to be a literary effort.
When expository descriptions of nature, still the dominant aspect of a book, are fitted into a literary design, so that the facts then give rise to some sort of meaning or interpretation, then we have the basic conditions for the natural history essay. The themes that make natural history information into a coherent, literary whole may be stated by the author in the first person, as in John Hay's Spirit of Survival (1974), where Hay found in the life histories of terns wonderfully cogent statements of the beauty and vulnerability of life itself — the life we share with these birds; or they may emerge from the facts as related in a third-person, more or less objective fashion. This latter way was Rachel Carson's choice in The Sea Around Us (1950, 1961); she arranged the facts of oceanography and marine biology tellingly, so that the drama and interplay of forces pointed inescapably toward a holistic, ecological view of nature. William O. Pruitt used a similar artistic strategy in Animals of the North (1967). By concentrating upon the central fact of the cold of the Arctic and showing the myriad adaptations such a climate requires, he brought out the theme of relationship, which is perhaps the essence of ecology.

The defining characteristic of the natural history essay is that whatever the method chosen for presentation, the main burden of the writing is to convey pointed instruction in the facts of nature. As we move toward the right on the spectrum, the role and relative importance of the author loom a bit larger: experience in nature — the feeling of being outdoors, the pleasure of looking closely, and the sense of revelation in small things closely attended to — takes an equal or almost equal place with the facts themselves. Where the natural history and the author's presence are more or less balanced, we have the "ramble." This is a classic American form. The author goes forth into nature, usually on a short excursion near home, and records the walk as observer-participant. Almost the entire work of John Burroughs, to take a prominent example, fits into the category of the ramble, from his earliest published bird walks in Wake-Robin (1871). Burroughs's own personality and way of responding to the natural scene were very much a part of his writing and were important to his popular success. His intense feeling for the woods and fields of his home ground — may never have been such a home body, in all of American literature, as Burroughs — is also a distinguishing mark of the "ramble" type of nature writing. Burroughs became identified with the patchwork of farms and woods in the vicinity of the Catskill Mountains in New York. The writer of rambles usually does not travel far, and seldom to wilderness; he or she is primarily interested in a loving study of the near, and often the pastoral. To say that the ramble is local, however, or that it often takes place on worked-over ground, is not to imply that it is in any way superficial. As Annie Dillard showed in Pilgrim at Tinker Creek (1974), deep familiarity with the most ordinary landscapes can blossom into immense themes.

Continuing rightward on the spectrum, we begin to move away from the primacy of natural history facts to a clear emphasis on the writer's experience. In essays of experience, the author's first-hand contact with nature is the frame for the writing: putting up a cabin in the wilderness (as Richard Proenneke did, in One Man's Wilderness, 1973), canoeing down a clear, wild river (John McPhee, Coming into the Country, 1977), walking the beach at night (Henry Beston, The
Outernost House, 1928), rebuilding the soil of a rundown farm (Louis Bromfield, Malabar Farm, 1948), or contemplating a desert sunset (Edward Abbey, Desert Solitaire, 1968). And much else. Instruction in natural history is often present in the "nature experience" essay, but it is not what structures the book. We are placed behind the writer's eyes here, looking out on this interesting and vital world and moving through it with the protagonist.

Within the broad category of the essay of experience in nature, there are three fairly well-defined subtypes, each with a distinctive avenue for philosophical reflection. Essays of solitude or escape from the city, as might be expected, work much with the contrast between conventional existence and the more intense, more wakeful life in contact with nature. This subtype, like the ramble, is a classic American form, but it tends to be much more critical and radical — compare Thoreau at Walden, anathematizing the false economy of society, and Abbey in the desert, waiting until the engineers drive away in their jeep, then pulling up and throwing away the stakes they had pounded into the ground to mark the location for a new, paved road.

Accounts of travel and adventure (which usually have a strong element of solitude in them) often present the same sort of contrast between the too-safe, habituated existence left behind and the vivid life of discovery. The travel and adventure writer often seems like a ramble writer gone wild; there is less emphasis on natural history and more on movement, solitude, and wildness. Often, the account is framed on the great mythic pattern of departure, initiation, and return, and always the account gains meaning from the basic American circumstance that wilderness, where the traveler and adventurer usually go, has always in our history been considered a realm apart. It is true that some travelers, such as William Bartram, have been deeply interested in the natural history of the new territories they explored: for example, in the Travels (1791), Bartram made extensive lists of the species he encountered. Nonetheless, the exhilaration of release from civilization, the sense of self-contained and self-reliant movement, and above all, the thrill of the new, are the prominent qualities here.

The farm essay, with its rooted and consistent emphasis upon stewardship and work (rather than study, or solitude, or discovery), may seem at first to be unrelated to the nature essay. It might be argued, too, that since farming is "only" about ten thousand years old, whereas our connections with wilderness are unimaginably deeper, the entire sensibility may be different. The sublime, so important to the aesthetic of the traveler, and even to the rambler,
An American Chronology

1492 Columbus makes landfall in the Bahamas. "All is so green that it is a pleasure to gaze upon it."

1524 Giovanni Verrazzano, cruising the eastern coast of North America, stops in southern New England for two weeks, in present-day Rhode Island; goes inland and sees "champaigns [great meadows] twenty-five to thirty leagues in extent, open and without any impediment of trees. . . ."

1528 Cabeza de Vaca begins a journey across much of the Southwest; in eight years and something over 2,000 miles of wandering, he is out of sight of Indians for only a few days.

1539 Hernando De Soto begins his expedition into the Southeast. Accompanying him are 600 troops, 213 horses, a pack of fighting hounds, and 13 pigs, to be bred along the way as a source of food.

1542 De Soto dies on the banks of the Mississippi River; his share of the swine herd is reckoned at 700 animals.

1562 Jean Ribaut coasts along Florida and South Carolina, looking for a site for a dissenters' colony. He responds with joy to the abundance of wildlife.

1585 Thomas Heriot, member of a voyage to Virginia sponsored by Sir Walter Raleigh, makes observations in his "brevie and true report of the new found land of Virginia," cataloguing some of the prominent trees and wildlife species.

1622 Thomas Morton arrives in New England and makes a survey of natural resources.

1624 The first cattle ("three Heifers and a Bull," according to John Josselyn) are brought to New England.

1629 William Wood begins a four-year residence in New England; he keeps notes on trees, soil, wildlife, and Indian methods of land use.

1632 Thomas Morton's New English Canaan is published.

1644 William Wood's New England's Prospect is published.

1658 John Josselyn makes his first voyage to New England.

1649 According to Josselyn's chronology (published in 1672), "This year a strange multitude of caterpillars in New England."

1672 Josselyn's New England's Rarities Discovered is published. It includes a list of twenty-two weeds introduced into the New World by the Europeans, including dandelion and plantain.

1678 John Banister ("America's first resident naturalist," according to his biographer) arrives in Virginia; he begins collecting plants and insects and sending them back to England.

1691 In England, John Ray publishes The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of Creation, signaling a new, higher status for scientific nature study and promoting a non-anthropocentric view.

1709 John Lawson, a surveyor, publishes A New Voyage to Carolina, which has been described as "the first major attempt at a natural history of the New World."

1712 Mark Catesby arrives in Virginia from England and begins a seven-year visit to the colonies.

1718 Massachusetts declares a three-year moratorium on deer hunting.

1722 Catesby begins a four-year study of the natural history of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahamas, including expeditions to areas uninhabited by Europeans.

1751 Catesby, having returned to England, begins serial publication of The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands. The artistic quality is praised, and the natural history accounts are regarded as the most detailed and comprehensive attempted to date in the colonies.

1734 John Bartram of Pennsylvania (William Bartram's father — see p. 36) begins collecting plants for his English patron Peter Collinson.

1735 The Swedish naturalist Linnaeus publishes Systema Naturae, rationalizing the nomenclature of natural history and stimulating its study.

1743 Benjamin Franklin proposes the organization of the American Philosophical Society, saying that "the first drudgery of settling new colonies" is now "pretty well over;" leaving leisure for the pursuit of knowledge.

1748 Peter Kalm, one of Linnaeus's best pupils, begins his travels in the colonies, making extensive natural history notes over the next two and a half years.

1749 Pennsylvania pays bounties on 640,000 gray squirrels.
1755 John Bartram proposes a geological map of the colonies. By systematic “borings” into the earth, he suggests, “we may compose a curious subterranean map.”

1759 William Bartram (John’s son) writes to the British ornithologist George Edwards that “many animals, which abounded formerly in settled parts, are now no more to be found, but retire to the unsettled border of the province; and that some birds, never known to early settlers, now appear in great numbers, and much annoy their corn-fields and plantations.”

1773 William Bartram begins four years of travel into the wilds of the Southeast.

1782 Crévecoeur publishes Letters from an American Farmer in London, an evocative appreciation of rural life, nature, and America.

1784 Thomas Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia is published in Paris. It includes natural history information and dismisses certain theories of the Comte de Buffon (sec p. 36) on New World animals.

1790 The first United States Census records a population of 3,929,714.

1791 William Bartram’s Travels is published to lukewarm reviews, but several British and European editions and translations follow.

1794 Samuel Williams, a Rutland minister, publishes A Natural and Civil History of Vermont.

1799 The last bison in the East is killed, in Pennsylvania.

1802 Alexander Wilson, who had arrived in America in 1794, begins his study of American birds.

1803 John James Audubon, eighteen, arrives in Pennsylvania.

1804 Lewis and Clark begin their expedition to the Pacific with thirty men; on the way, they will collect several hundred specimens of western flora and fauna.

1807 Cedar waxwings sell for twenty-five cents a dozen in Philadelphia meat markets.

1808 Thomas Nuttall arrives in Philadelphia; he begins botanizing the day after his arrival.

1810 James Audubon completes the first geological survey of the United States.

Volume I of Alexander Wilson’s American Ornithology is published; when complete in 1814, the study fills nine volumes and covers 260 species, in prose both precise and affecting.

1821 A Journal of Travels into the Arkansas Territory, During the Year 1819, by Thomas Nuttall, is published.

1825 The Erie Canal opens, facilitating midwestern and Great Lakes development.

1826 John D. Godman’s American Natural History, a text with a progressive view of predation, is published.

1829 The first locomotive in America proves too heavy for the tracks during a trial run in Pennsylvania.

1831 John James Audubon commences publication of the Ornithological Biography, which includes essays on American scenes and citizens.

1832 Thomas Nuttall’s Manual of the Ornithology of the United States and Canada, a handbook that will be in use throughout the nineteenth century, is published.

1834 Nuttall crosses the continent in company with a commercial expedition; the natural history studies he undertakes in California in 1835 are the first conducted there by an American. The last elk in the Adirondacks is killed.

1836 Ralph Waldo Emerson publishes his immensely influential Nature.

1841 The artist George Catlin, after a venture into the western wilderness, proposes a “nation’s Park.”

1845 On July 4, Henry David Thoreau moves into the “tight shingled and plastered” 10’ × 15’ house he had built at Walden Pond for $28.12½.

1849 The Gold Rush begins the rapid transformation of much of the accessible California landscape.

John Muir’s father brings his young family from Scotland to wild Wisconsin, and begins clearing land for a farm.

1851 Henry David Thoreau delivers his lecture on “The Wild” for the first time.

1854 Henry David Thoreau’s Walden is published.

1859 In England, Charles Darwin publishes The Origin of Species.

1860 The population of the United States is 31,443,321.

United States railroad tracks total 30,000 miles.

1862 Henry David Thoreau dies. His last words are “...moose...Indian.”

1864 George Perkins Marsh publishes Man and Nature, a study of the decline of cultures following the abuse of their environment.

1867 Alaska is purchased.

The last elk in Pennsylvania is killed.

1869 John Wesley Powell, with a crew of nine men in four boats, descends the Green and Colorado rivers. On his explorations of the West, Powell describes the Escalante and the Henry
Mountains (both in Utah Territory), the last river and mountain range to be discovered.
In this year of the “Golden Spike,” American locomotives are estimated to have burned 19,000 cords of wood per day.
John Muir spends his first summer in the Sierra.
Yellowstone National Park, the first such reserve in the world, is established.
From this year to 1883, the last bison hunts are conducted, in something very like frenzy: “never before in all history were so many large wild animals of one species slain in so short a space of time” (Theodore Roosevelt).
Barbed wire comes to Texas.
The last Labrador duck is killed on December 12, on Long Island.
Clarence Dutton’s *Tertiary History of the Grand Cañon District* is published.
The gasoline engine is developed.
The United States Census Bureau declares the frontier closed.
Yosemite National Park is created, drawn on boundaries suggested by John Muir.
The population of the United States is 62,947,714.
The last pair of wild whooping cranes to have nested in the United States is seen at a marsh near Eagle Lake, Iowa.
On March 24, the last passenger pigeon to be seen in the wild is killed at Sargent’s, Ohio.
John C. Van Dyke’s *The Desert* is published.
The “nature-fakers” controversy (see p. 66) begins with an article by John Burroughs attacking anthropomorphism.
The nation’s first federal wildlife refuge is created, in Florida.
Mary Austin’s first book, *The Land of Little Rain*, is published.
The last Carolina parakeet is seen in the wild.
The American chestnut blight breaks out in the Brooklyn Botanical Garden following an importation of Oriental plants, and quickly spreads.
*The Writings of Henry David Thoreau* are published, in twenty volumes.
The United States Forest Service is established.

1911 Enos Mills’ *The Spell of the Rockies*, one of the comparatively small number of natural history books from that region, is published.
1914 The last passenger pigeon dies in the Cincinnati Zoo.
1915 Liberty Hyde Bailey publishes *The Holy Earth*, a radical agrarian text.
1916 The National Park Service is established.
1920 John Burroughs’ *Accepting the Universe* is published.
Rockwell Kent’s *Wilderness* is published.
1921 John Burroughs dies on a train somewhere in Ohio. His last words are “How far are we from home?”
1924 The first wilderness reserve within a National Forest is established in New Mexico, in part due to the efforts of Aldo Leopold.
1925 The last cougar in Yellowstone to be killed in the Park Service’s “control” program is dispatched.
1928 Henry Beston’s *The Outermost House* is published.
1930 The population of the United States is 122,775,046.
1932 The last heath hen is seen on Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts.
1934 Hawk Mountain, Pennsylvania, a ridge on a noted raptor migration route, is leased by conservationists, and two wardens are hired. Over this year and the next, predator control within Yellowstone National Park comes to an end.
1935 Donald Culross Peattie’s *Almanac for Moderns* is published.
1938 Hawk Mountain, Pennsylvania, is purchased by conservationists and becomes the world’s first sanctuary for birds of prey.
1939 In Mount McKinley National Park, Adolph Murie begins the first scientific study of wolf behavior in the wild.
1944 Sally Carrighar’s *One Day on Beetle Rock* is published.
Adolph Murie’s *The Wolves of Mount McKinley* is published.
1948 Fairfield Osborn’s *Our Plundered Planet*, one of the first post-World War II environmental alarm calls, is published.
1949 Aldo Leopold’s *Sand County Almanac* is published.
J. Frank Dobie’s *The Voice of the Coyote* is published.
1951 *The Sea Around Us*, by Rachel Carson, is published; the book becomes a major best seller.
Edwin Way Teale’s *North with the Spring*, the first of the “American Seasons” series, is published.
1956 Robert Marshall’s *Arctic Wilderness* is published.
1959  Peter Matthiessen's *Wildlife in America*, a comprehensive history of extinctions and protective measures, is published.

1960  John Graves' *Goodbye to a River* is published.

1962  Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* is published; the book inaugurates a new era of environmental concern. Margaret Murie's *Two in the Far North* is published; the final section directs attention to Alaskan wilderness concerns.

1964  The Wilderness Act, establishing a National Wilderness Preservation System, becomes law after eight years of legislative struggle. By 1986, 3.78 percent of the United States is under protection as legal wilderness, with more than half of that located in Alaska.

1967  Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* is published, helping to establish wilderness as a field for historical scholarship.

1968  Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* is published. The National Wild and Scenic Rivers System is created. By 1986, 72 rivers or parts of rivers are included, totaling somewhat more than 7,000 miles of flowing water, out of 356,000 possible within the United States.


1970  On January 1 the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 becomes law, mandating consideration of the environment before any major federal action is taken. The first "Earth Day" is celebrated, heightening public awareness of environmental issues.

The Clean Air Act of 1970 establishes nondegradation of existing clean air as a principle, and for the first time requires the states to attain air quality of specified standards within a specified time.

1972  The Federal Water Pollution Control Act of 1972 becomes law, establishing regulatory programs.

1973  The Endangered Species Act becomes law, requiring both protection of listed species and recovery programs.

1974  Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is published.

1977  Wendell Berry's *The Unsettling of America* is published.

1978  Of *Wolves and Men*, by Barry Lopez, is published. Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* is published.

1980  Paul Brooks publishes *Speaking for Nature*. The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act becomes law, increasing by nearly four times the size of the National Wilderness Preservation System and more than doubling the size of the National Park and National Wildlife Refuge systems.

The population of the United States is 226,504,825.

1982  Paul Shepard's *Nature and Madness* is published.

1984  The National Academy of Sciences reports that approximately 53,500 synthetic chemicals are in use in the United States. Fourteen percent of these have been tested sufficiently to allow a partial hazard assessment.

1985  In *An Environmental Agenda for the Future*, the chief executive officers of the ten largest American environmental organizations write, "Continued economic growth is essential."

1986  *Arctic Dreams*, by Barry Lopez, is published.

1987  As part of a captive breeding program, the last wild California condor is captured and taken to the San Diego Zoo. John Hay's *The Immortal Wilderness* is published.