

There was a time when "nature" meant every living thing on earth, the earth itself, the air, the water, the weather, even the stars and planets. In that unsophisticated age, the "naturalist" was a man interested in all such natural phenomena. But times change, and as man urbanized his life he came to think of nature as alien if not, indeed, hostile. And the naturalist became the person who specialized in some aspect of that strange, alien nature.

But nature has its own insistence. The urban tides ebbed as well as flowed, and many returned to a natural environment. With characteristic human zeal to understand the new, the strange, the alien, some of them were fascinated by the natural world around them. And even some of those who persisted or were trapped in the urban environment looked about them with new interest in such things as birds, insects, plants, and animals. A whole new legion of naturalists, in the old sense, appeared. Since the old term had lost its essential meaning, we couldn't call them naturalists, so we granted some of them the name "bird watcher," "animal watcher" and "plant watcher" — tongue, logical though it suggests itself.

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of them study wild life in a city park. Some explore botany and entomology in a suburban backyard. And many of them take every chance they find to go down a highway, leave the highway for a side road, quit the road for a country lane, and finally come to a place where wild plants far outnumber tame ones and human beings are vastly in the minority in the community of living creatures. Some, who are either dedicated or specially fortunate, go to the country to live.

I am one of the fortunate ones. I live on a hundred-acre farm with a riverfront, an area of fields and pastureland, a relatively wild mountainside of brush and timber. We came here to live in part because I have been a nature watcher all my life and in part because as a writer I have a degree of leeway in my choice of residence. Underlying these reasons is the belief that close acquaintance with nature is essential to a balanced and reasonable philosophy of life, and such a philosophy seems important to me.

The ideal time to go to the country, to live or to visit and explore, is March. March marks the beginning of the natural year. Spring peepers peep, the earliest wildflowers bloom, trees prepare to open bud, migrant birds return, and the first of the insect hordes are hatching. From that beginning one can follow the season into Summer with its growing leaves, burgeoning fields, nesting birds, and birthing animals. As Summer passes one can see how nature matures, with reddening berries, young birds in flight, insects swarming, flowers turning to seed heads, nuts ripening. One can watch and wonder through golden September and into the magnificence of October.