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Weird Nature by John Downer

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BOOK REVIEW

Weird Nature. John Downer. Firefly Books (U.S.) Inc., Buffalo, NY. 2002. 156 pp. ISBN 1-55297-586-X.

This is a beautifully illustrated and composed book telling short stories of some of the weird ways animals make their livings. Written as a companion to a Discovery Channel series from cable television, this book is heavy on pictures but light on text and explanations.

I was thrilled to read of strange things animals do in such chapters as Marvelous Motion, Bizarre Breeding, Fantastic Feeding, Devious Defenses, Puzzling Partners, and Peculiar Potions. Many of the examples, which are indeed weird by human standards, are familiar to the professional natural historian. To illustrate, nice photos of flying lizards, hovering nautilus, and head-to-head spiny lobsters are given. The explanation of jumping beans being caterpillars in desert seeds and the artistry of bower birds follow. The piece on foam-nesting frogs is certain to grab the reader's attention and must have been even more striking in video. But enough of the segments are new and fresh that it was exciting to turn each page. I found particularly amazing the shot of

a velvet worm (phylum Onychophora) squirting sticky "glue" to ensnare prey! The discussion and photo of the parasitic candiru catfish approaching the midsection of a male in the Amazon will assuredly attract the attention of at least half of the readers.

On the whole, the individual written treatments are too short for my tastes. But, of course, one must remember the attention span of the particular television audience and the goals of the author. Despite considering this, I was disappointed that the weird and bizarre stories and amazing photographs were not followed by some kind of bibliography or note on how to read more about the facets covered. This, for me, was frustrating, and for this reason I would suggest finding the book at a public library and quickly reading it in a quiet corner. The content is wonderful but too brief for use by biologists in the museum, classroom, or on a field course.

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