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Stalking the Big Bird: A Tale of Turkeys, Biologists, and Bureaucrats by Harley Shaw

Jared B. Lee

Brigham Young University, jaredblee@gmail.com

Jerald B. Johnson

Brigham Young University, jerry_johnson@byu.edu

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BOOK REVIEW

Stalking the Big Bird: A Tale of Turkeys, Biologists, and Bureaucrats. 2004. Harley Shaw. University of Arizona Press, Tucson. \$17.95, paperback; 160 pages. ISBN 0-8165-2298-7.

There was a time when books conveyed to the public a wonderful mix of discovery in the natural world coupled with tales of traveling naturalists as they made these discoveries. In this delightful little book, Harley Shaw captures the spirit of that time by weaving together bits of natural history with an entertaining narrative about his own adventures researching Merriam's Wild Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo merriami*) in the southwestern United States. Books like these are not as common as they once were, but this one still offers that exciting eyewitness peek into the world as seen through the eyes of a naturalist.

With over 25 years spent as a field biologist for the Arizona Game and Fish Department, Shaw brings a vast amount of experience and a unique perspective to the topic of wildlife management. He describes firsthand how technological advances—such as radiotelemetry and use of GPS—can drive the way research is done and even shape the very kinds of research questions one might ask. Yet it is the human-in-nature elements of his book that remind us just how physically demanding it can be for field biologists to gather the kinds of data necessary to understand how the ecological world works.

Shaw is not a newcomer to nature writing. Some readers might be familiar with his earlier book, *Soul Among Lions*, an account of mountain lion studies in western North America. In *Stalking the Big Bird*, Shaw once again captures the excitement of field research. What is notable about this newer work is how he manages to captivate the reader while focusing on a much less charismatic organism—the rare subspecies known as Merriam's turkey. Much of the appeal of this book comes from Shaw's accounts of

adventures with other biologists and of his sparring with bureaucrats assigned to oversee his research. Shaw writes candidly about both, and he is not tepid in pointing out his own mistakes as a young field biologist. This honesty is refreshing but perhaps tainted with time, especially in his evaluation of government agencies charged with managing natural resources. Yet Shaw still manages to critique while avoiding barbed attacks that might otherwise detract from his book.

Composed of several short chapters, each a unique vignette, this book invites the reader along a temporal journey from Shaw's early beginning work with turkeys to his final reflections on what he has learned over the course of his career. In the preface, Shaw states that his purpose in writing the book is “to demonstrate the difficulties of gaining and implementing new knowledge of a single wild species” (page ix). As one might expect from this goal, Shaw delivers several accounts of the joys and perils of field research. He begins by describing his first experiences capturing Merriam's turkey in the mid-1960s, including humorous anecdotes of the struggles he had using cannon nets, which apparently can be as dangerous as their name implies.

Early chapters provide additional detail on a variety of personal experiences. He describes how his research tactics changed as logging practices appeared to impact Merriam's turkey. He shares his experiences working at check stations for hunters, revealing the tension that sometimes arises between those charged to manage wildlife and those who want to consume it. He also provides a clear look into the early days of radio-tracking as he describes his experiences fitting turkeys with the first radio-tags and his attempts at repairing them in the field when they broke (a frequent experience from Shaw's recollections).

Shaw skips forward in time midway through the book, jumping from the early 1970s to the mid-1980s when he returned to turkey research after taking time away to work with mountain

lions. Focusing on his return to turkeys, he describes ways that the research atmosphere had changed as Merriam's turkey was given higher priority for conservation and technology became better developed. This before-and-after contrast illustrates the impact that both politics and technology can have on natural resource management. Shaw expresses pleasure in having had so much data but dismay at the uncertainty of how to analyze these data.

Chapters 12–14 provide most of the basic natural history of this species. However, readers should be warned that this book is not intended to provide detailed descriptive biology about Merriam's turkey. Rather, the focus here is on integrating several facts about turkeys with Shaw's narrative. Descriptions of habitat preferences, turkey nesting, and brood behavior are among the topics given some attention. The reader will also enjoy Shaw's sense of discovery as he describes the surprisingly loud cacophony of turkey calls each night and the turkeys' ability to disguise their nesting so well on the ground.

In the remaining chapters of the book, Shaw backs away from the focus on Merriam's turkey and explores the management implications of several decades of turkey research. He describes his experiences writing management guidelines for Merriam's turkey and then struggling to get them approved and published within the government-agency framework. This part of the book most clearly demonstrates the difficulty of taking a single-species approach to managing complex ecosystems and the even more difficult task of implementing recommendations when several competing government mandates exist. From this, Shaw offers a long-view perspective on the way mankind now interacts with the natural world, and he shares his opinion liberally on the state of wildlife management. He concludes with a call for altruism and a need for humans to be more considerate of the environment because, as he states, "everyone else seems to be sliding rapidly toward a worship of the dollar and the devaluation of wildness" (pages 136–137).

A few things do deserve criticism in this book. Readers looking for details of turkey biology or a comprehensive reference on turkeys will not find this book fully satisfying.

However, the author does provide references to other works that address turkey biology in greater detail. The book also lacks maps and figures, which may prove frustrating to readers not familiar with the geography of the areas described, but brief notes organized by chapters are provided at the end of the book. Beyond this, though, *Stalking the Big Bird* largely delivers what it promises.

Written for a general audience, this book will be appealing to a variety of readers. Academics who interact with government agencies on conservation research will find insight into the research atmosphere and into constraints agency biologists work under. Students considering a career in wildlife management will benefit by learning of the challenges and creativity required of wildlife managers. Past and current wildlife agency employees will identify with much of what Shaw has to share, perhaps especially regarding the bureaucracy of wildlife management. Turkey hunters that read this book will likely see their hunting experiences from a new perspective. Finally, lay readers with an interest in turkey biology or those fond of books that conjure up a sense of place in the southwestern U.S. will also enjoy this insightful overview of the natural history of turkeys.

By giving people a look into wildlife management in an entertaining and straightforward way, Shaw helps them better understand environmental issues in the southwestern United States, especially issues regarding how management decisions affect the public, how land is used for economic interests, and of course, issues about wildlife. Shaw has produced a book that will invite people to appreciate the wildness of wild species around them, many of which face challenges similar to Merriam's turkey.

Jared B. Lee¹ and Jerald B. Johnson^{1,2}

¹Evolutionary Ecology Laboratories,
Department of Biology, Brigham Young
University, Provo, UT 84602.

²Monte L. Bean Life Science Museum,
Brigham Young University, Provo, UT
84602.