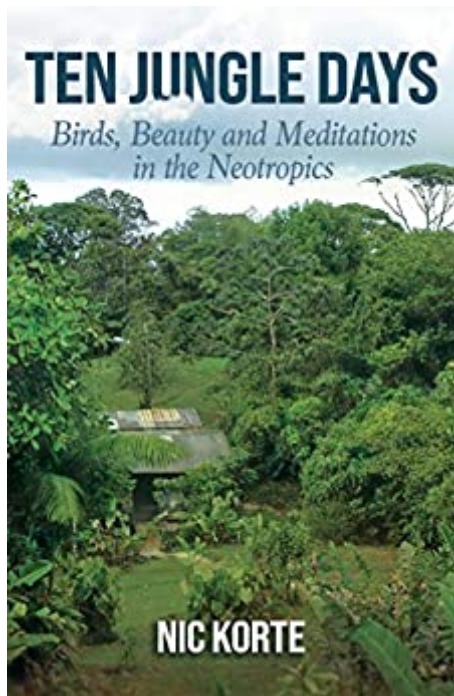


Book Review: Ten Jungle Days – Birds, Beauty and Meditations in the Neotropics

JoAnn Hackos. May 3, 2021 :

by Nic Korte



Nic Korte spoke at a recent Evergreen Audubon chapter meeting, providing his insights into the plight of neotropical migrating birds, birds that spend a small portion of their year in North America but a larger portion in Central or South America. Their journey between north and south and back again is a challenge—bad weather often impedes the journey north. But their ability to thrive in both north and south is much more significantly impeded by deteriorating habitat and changing climate. Nic provides an important perspective on the lives of some of our neotropical migrants and their stay-at-home fellows in his book, ***Ten Jungle Days***.

I envy Nic's multiple trips south to Costa Rica, although he is much more of an adventurer than I am. He spends a short time in the home of friends in the Valle Central, but his real destination is in the outback, really out back. Nic moves from a pleasant small house amid the urban population to the deep jungle in search of – antpittas.

Costa Rica is a remarkable destination for avid birders. As we learn, it has 5% of the world's diversity with 0.25% of its landmass. Costa Rica connects the north and south American ecozones. As a result, it is incredibly rich in all types of fauna and flora. Nic's destination is called Rara Avis (rare bird). The "road" in

requires a four-wheel-drive tractor to navigate the pits. He lets us know that Rara Avis is well preserved because the road is so bad. The accommodations are very basic, but the birds are incredible.

A research team from Florida State University is working at Rara Avis the summer that Nic describes in the book. They invite him to try for a rarity, the Red-throated Caracara. On the way, Nic finds Scarlet, Summer, and Hepatic Tanagers, all birds that travel north into the United States. He reminds us that these too are tropical birds. Unfortunately, the Caracara proves elusive.

What I find most interesting in ***Ten Jungle Days*** are all the meditations. On the way to the Caracara, we learn about one of Nic's heroes, scientist, author and naturalist Alexander F. Skutch, who spent considerable time at Rara Avis and wrote one of the first birding guides to Costa Rica. The meditations are just as interesting and stimulating as the sightings of rare and interesting birds.

Walking in the Rara Avis jungle isn't always pleasant. Nic describes what it is like to be lost and then find the path again. He knows that people die from bites of the poisonous Fer-de-Lance, but the birds are there: he hears the unforgettable song of the Nightingale Wren, finds a Pauraque at a waterfall, and encounters a king-sized, fully raucous, wildly entertaining antswarm visited by 12 species of birds.

The Antpittas continue to be elusive until one calls nearby. Nic plays the call and the antpitta circles him, still invisible. After 40 minutes, it hops out right in front of him, hops back and forth, and finally disappears while continuing to call.

What is most interesting and fun to read in ***Ten Jungle Days*** is the diversity of Nic's message. The reader moves quickly between amazing observations of birds and animals in the forest to observations about the environment, about the devastation caused by pineapple plantations, oil drilling, and pipelines, about Buddhism, and about family and friends. The diversity of thoughts is compelling.

Toward the end of the visit to Rara Avis, Nic is bitten by a Watson's Climbing Rat. He needs a rabies booster shot before he flies home. But as he reflects upon the bite, he realizes that the bite was actually his fault. He kept food and food-smelling gear in his room, rather than in a separate area. And, the rat is still in his room for several days!

He brightens when some of the scientists catch a Purple Caecilian, an amphibian that resembles a big worm, ten inches long and purple. He moves through thoughts about climate change and returns to a focus on the present expedition and another hike. This hike reveals an anteater and a spider monkey. The last day brings a Black Narrowmouth Frog. He doesn't want to leave.

Reading ***Ten Jungle Days*** is an adventure. Yes, there is the amazing birding at Rara Avis but there are also all the thoughts akin to that, about the state of the environment, the need for better policies, the importance of respect for wildlife. ***Ten Jungle Days*** is an amazing story. Please find time to read it.