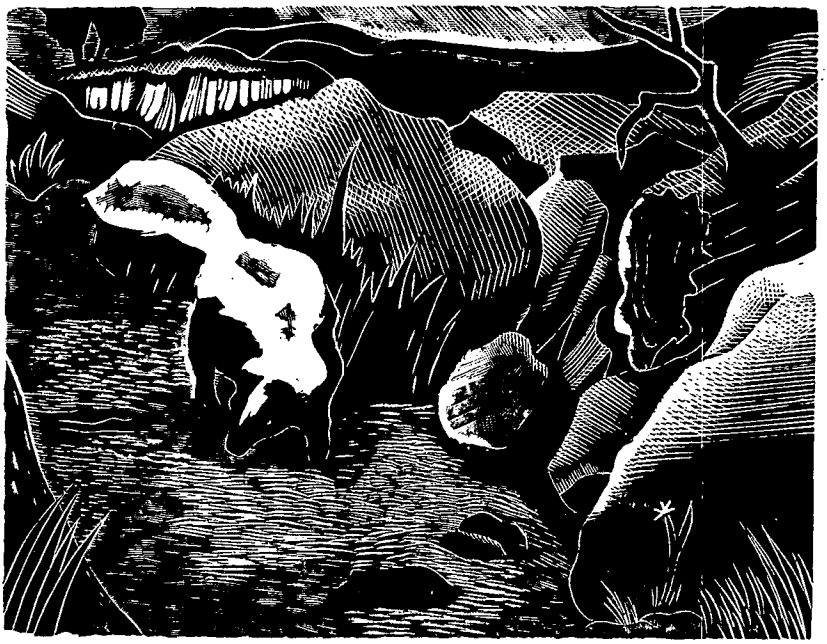
DOWN TO EARTH

By Alan Devoe

The Adventure of Nature

There may sometimes seem, to those unfamiliar with the matter, something a little pointless and unprofitable in the way a naturalist keeps prowling the same small woods day after day, haunting the same parochial fields and streams, reinvestigating with apparently unabating eagerness the same little local fragment of outdoors. To be sure, his explorations are doubtless refreshing. It is always restorative to a man to be in touch with the earth; it may even be, for some



Skunk *Frank Utpatel*

men, a kind of urgent necessity, as it is said to have been for Antaeus. But a naturalist acts as though he were expecting to find something *new:* as though he were anticipating a possibility of seeing something no one else had ever seen before, a possibility of actually increasing or altering human knowledge. And surely, in this year 1943, when the shelves of the libraries groan with their gathered rows of huge and competent mammalogies and ornithologies and botanies and entomologies, there exists no such possibility. An explorer wandering to the far Arctic or the remote jungle, yes — such a one might possibly find something to require supplementing or revision of the immense body of established lore. But surely no such chance is open to the nature-watching countryman who never stirs beyond his own stone pasture-fences.

Well, it may seem that way; but it is quite otherwise. The fact, of which a naturalist early comes to be keenly aware, at first perhaps with a sense of disappointment but presently with a kindling of excitement, is that our knowledge of the world of nature, even homely and local nature, however many and imposing upon the bookshelves may be the great tomes that hold it, is a very tiny affair. The commonest thing in the everyday outdoors — an ant, a deer-fly, a tadpole, a cabbage-worm under a leaf — contains depths of mystery and meaning: riddle within riddle within riddle, like a nest of Chinese puzzle-boxes. We have had only a very little time, a mere handful of centuries, for making our inquiry. Because of the limitation of our time and strength, we have achieved a knowledge, even of the commonest things, that is only partial. And because of the further limitation put upon us by our human fallibility, even this partial knowledge contains in many cases perpetuations of old errors, never reinvestigated and revised. A birch copse on a New England hillside contains quite probably a thousand facts that have never yet been chronicled; and the serried textbooks that do chronicle the natural history of such a place contain, at a guess, some half a dozen statements that are wrong: statements which were mistakenly put down years ago in a textbook, and have subsequently been copied from textbook to textbook to textbook, which is the way in which a surprisingly large number of reference works are written.

The established texts of natural history are a tremendous monument. Further, no naturalist can

do without them. He cannot follow the migrant catbirds, when they leave his summer blackberry thicket, to see where they winter. He must look it up. He cannot measure the moon; he must look to the library to see what an astronomer says. He has not time to study every protozoon in the brook or every weed in the meadow or the whole of the life of every mammal even on an acre. A great deal of the information which he must incorporate into his own body of knowledge, if he would reach a decent spaciousness of education, he must take on faith from earlier authority. But he has not been a naturalist for very long before he finds, on the basis of some personal observation, that a textbook has deceived him. He has not long gone wandering and wondering in the woods before he discovers that the answers to a great many of the simplest everyday questions are not to be found in any of the books at all. He has not been a hawk-watcher and a moss-gatherer and a dace-netter for many seasons before he finds that the phenomena of earth are more flexible and variant and unpredictable than is allowed for in the sets of statistics which are sometimes transferred from textbook to textbook as piously and unchangingly as copied Scripture.

It is borne in upon him that nature is still largely nature the unknown; and that, by using honestly and sharply his own eyes, he can find new things under the sun. Where nature is not the unknown, it may be the mis-known. It lies open to him, in a score of fields, to correct old errors. He will always need to turn to the textbooks for many things, and to take on faith what they tell him. But though he must perforce thus incorporate into his body of belief many things which he cannot check, he will be ever aware that he may find at any moment — under a stone, in the top of a fir-tree, in the next cow-pasture — the visible proof that he has been sponsoring a mistake.

The textbooks are all very well. But they tell only a little of the truth, and sometimes they tell it wrong. One kind of truth only, a naturalist comes to realize, cannot ever be gainsaid. That is the truth of things seen first-hand, sounds personally heard, emotions experienced by oneself, nature touched and watched and sensed and smelled without a mediator. And so a naturalist may revisit, day after day, the same small woods. He may look for thirty years at crows, and his eye be always eager. The stretching rows of natural histories on the

shelves have the majestic look of a record that is finished and perfect. But what we know of nature, even in our back yards, is not finished; it is scarcely begun. It is not perfect; it embodies errors of commission and omission and uncritical copying. There are a hundred riddles in a ten-acre woodlot. There are vast gaps in what is known even about a beaver. It was but a matter of months ago that a naturalist found out — what nobody had ever known, or known correctly, before — how a bat avoids obstacles in the dark. The common woods, the familiar fields, call and recall to a naturalist to come and examine them for himself. Perpetually they attract and excite him. For he goes to them, in spirit and in fact, as one going to the verge of a frontier.

II

How long is a muskrat's hind foot? It says here, in this fat and recent volume of mammalogy, that the length is 3.2 inches. A most precise measurement, surely. Oddly enough, the identical figure is given also in this other mammalogy published ten years ago, and in this other one published twenty-three years ago, and in this fourth one which dates from the nineteenth century. On the barn door of a neighbor who is a trapper, over yonder across the mountain, there are nailed more than a hundred muskrat feet. Apply a ruler to them, and it grows apparent that the arid little statistic, 3.2, is a statistic only. The books do not obtain it from nature. They obtain it from each other.

Here now, in this recent volume of herpetology, it is stated that a rattlesnake cannot be poisoned by its own bite. Who shall doubt it? It has been averred in countless authoritative volumes, and for many years. But a while ago a naturalist got around to checking up for himself this established datum, in the way in which naturalists like, whenever and wherever they can, to be first-hand observers. (As said earlier, a naturalist must perforce take much on faith from the texts; with ill-luck, he may even find that he has thus sponsored an old error. But ideally, though impossibly, he would like not to mention in his own books even the stars, without having checked them to see whether they are where they are said to be. He would wish not even to believe in the poisonousness of the deadly mushroom, *Amanita muscaria*, excepting he had eaten one.) Well, a number of rattlesnakes were made to bite themselves. They died of the venom.

It is exciting to invalidate an old supposed truth; it is stimulating to disclose the copyism in statistics. But it is the faults of omission, in the body of established lore, that chiefly excite a naturalist and make his every expedition, even into the same hay-meadow and the same woods day after day, a great adventure. Few but naturalists realize how enormous is nature's area of the unknown. A common hairy woodpecker, now: how does it spend its winter nights? Does it always take shelter in a hole, as a downy woodpecker does, or does it often sleep clinging to a tree-trunk, and what is the relative frequency of the performances? It remains to be learned. What about the domestic life of water shrews? The little beasts are not extremely rare; but they are nocturnal and aquatic and elusive, and there remain to be discovered a hundred of their secrets. How about the copulation of porcupines? . . . an odd and whimsical subject, its data thus far eked out largely with the help of folk-myth. The vocabulary of crows: has anybody really made a systematic study of it? To what extent, precisely, are wild creatures sensitive to barometric change, and thus weather prophets? There is the matter of the animal mind. The old compartments of Instinct and Intelligence are not serviceable. The mystery of wild wisdom, of deep-knowing, of the intuitions and insights that lie between automatic instinct and analytical thought . . . this realm needs lifetimes of first-hand observation..

Those are some of the reasons why a naturalist goes into the outdoors, day after day, with unflagging eagerness. To be sure, he would probably go anyway; for he is only partly an inquirer, and partly a man daft with the love of the earth; and in the sunlit and the wooded places he finds his peace and his happiness and possibly his God. But it adds stimulation to know, when he goes forth, that he goes not only as a pilgrim, but also, potentially, as a pioneer. Turn a stone, and he may overthrow forty volumes of assertion. Peer into a tangle of bindweed, and he may see something no other human eye has seen. He may be able — who knows? — to gather comprehensive information on the nesting-ways of parula warblers in areas where their regular nesting-moss does not grow. If he does, he will know what none has ever known before.

THE LIBRARY

Utopians, Left and Right

By Philip Rahv

Harold J. Laski, author of many political works and a member of the Executive Committee of the British Labor Party, is one of England's most famous leftists. In this country the liberals adore him, while the radicals are at a loss what to make of him. In conservative circles he is regarded as a "dangerous influence" — which is an attitude not surprising as such, though typical of an essentially defensive state of mind. It so happens that Laski's bark is worse than his bite; and if it were not for their morbid fear of social change — now inevitable in any case, no matter who is put in charge of postwar affairs — our conservatives would know how to rate correctly a man of Laski's background and position. In England such matters are understood almost instinctively, whereas over here conservative opinion is still so politically immature as to be unable to grasp the all-important distinction between the phrase and the act.

In *Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*[1] Laski writes with vigor and precision so long as he confines himself to expounding the faults of the present social structure. But the moment he puts forward his proposals for the future, the argument peters out in idealistic abstractions. For on the one hand Laski believes that if peace and democracy are to be maintained capitalism must be scrapped, and, on the other, that the course advocated by the more fiery socialists cannot but bring on a dictatorship by which *all* classes will be deprived of their basic liberties. What, then, is to be done? Here is where Laski introduces his pet idea of a "revolution by consent," which, if it means anything, can only mean that the propertied classes in Great Britain, and by implication in America, too, are somehow to be persuaded to relinquish *voluntarily* their functions and powers — that is to say, they are to be persuaded to commit economic and political suicide — so as

[1] $3.50. *Viking.*