

## Review: When the Rains Come: A Naturalist's Year in the Sonoran Desert

By John Alcock

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Alcock, John. *When the Rains Come: A Naturalist's Year in the Sonoran Desert*. Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 2009. 334pp. ISBN: 9780816527625. US \$21.95, paper.

Now Emeritus, Professor John Alcock (from Arizona State University) had already written numerous books on animal behaviour, including three titles about the Sonoran Desert National Monument in Arizona: *Sonoran Desert Spring* (1994), *Sonoran Desert Summer* (1994), and the praised *In a Desert Garden: Love and Death among the Insects* (1997). This fourth book titled *When the Rains Come: A Naturalist's Year in the Sonoran Desert* focuses on the one year, 2006, which the author spent in the Utery Mountains, in order to observe and chronicle its wildlife and the subtle seasonal changes (p. 1). Incidentally, this whole book about time and timing is structured according to the shifting of the seasons, from January to December. We understand that even a seemingly static place like a desert is experiencing changes at a very slow pace. For some of his experimentations, Professor John Alcock sometimes compares his photographs of a single place shot at two different moments, like his comparative views on Utery Peak taken in 1980 and 2005 (p. 22). A similar comparison is proposed with a cactus photographed in 1991 and 2005 (p. 110). Professor Alcock mentions as well the previous research that was done in early 20<sup>th</sup> century; he acknowledges the older images of this same desert taken by Raymond Turner's team; but sadly, these photographs previously made by other scholars are commented and praised, but not reproduced here (p. 24).

If Professor Alcock were just "an entomologist of sorts" as he humbly introduces himself, his latest book would be just a collection of mere photographs depicting insects, plants, landscapes (p. 1). However, *When the Rains Come* is not really a "coffee-table-book" depicting large and colorful images with comments; quite the opposite, it is a scholarly essay written by a prolific ecologist and illustrated with his own photos (at an average of about one photograph per every four pages). Texts, not images, are telling the story. We find as well his observations, images (of landscapes, saguaros, flowers, snakes, insects, and birds), comments, plus a general context provided by this noted biologist. The unusual and sudden storms in March and December seemed particularly spectacular, giving this book about a desert its unexpected title (p. 309). Furthermore, since he had observed this desert during three decades, Professor Alcock witnessed the beauty, but also the pollution in some parts during the 1970s (p. 75).

Like a diary, *When the Rains Come* provides many personal thoughts and impressions from a naturalist fascinated by this desert. But unlike a diary, the author mixes his observations with scientific analysis and many hypotheses to explain these phenomena and changes being observed (p. 234). For example, in order to understand in ecological terms why some saguaros have disappeared from this desert, Professor Alcock argues that there exists "dedicated saguaro hunters" and rustlers who specifically target these plants because they are rare and therefore "they bring a premium price from homeowners who want a rare and unusual cactus in their front yard" (p. 111). In other words, scarcity creates rarity.

Almost like the desert, this *When the Rains Come: A Naturalist's Year in the Sonoran Desert* is sometimes similar to a minimalist narrative written at the first person: for instance, three pages are dedicated to describe just a cut fence episode and the hypotheses about the possible intruders coming from Mexico (p. 299). My only quibble would be the absence of any map in a book exploring so many regions of this desert. Although not essential, this book in ecology and visual history gives a detailed portrait of a complex and lesser-known region, with countless observations that go beyond the realm of Environmental Studies.

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