

BOOK REVIEW 2012 – #2

Side Channels. A Collection of Nature Writing and Memoir by Thomas V. Lerczak (2011). 186 pp. Mill City Press, Minneapolis, MN. \$15.95.

This book is an unusual hybrid: part birder's field guide, part general natural history, and part memoir. As a study in contradictions we learn that the author grew up in urban Chicago and how he came to live in the open country near the Illinois River. We learn how, from an early age, he was drawn to nature, and especially to observation of birds. Following his ecological graduate studies Lerczak became a state biologist. In his duties as a staff member of the Nature Preserves Commission, he has come into close contact with many habitat types. Through his work and through his writing for Illinois Audubon Magazine, he has emerged as one of Illinois' premier naturalists.

The volume is a collection of 30 chapters, fourteen of which originally appeared in Illinois Audubon magazine. Others are personal observations and reflections seen here for the first time. In the memoir-based chapters he notes that he is especially drawn to rivers. His descriptions of them, and their wildlife, are especially evocative.

Longtime Illinois residents will doubtless find much they did not already know. Lerczak always digs into the back story as he describes topics such as the habits of Great Blue Herons, eagles in winter refuges, the life of the six species of swallows along the Illinois River, the reasons why we have bur oaks in Mason County, or the territories of Red-headed Woodpeckers. We learn why hawks don't glide over large lakes, and of the habitat needs of vultures vs. eagles. We learn why suppression of fires has the unintended consequence of changing the composition of oak forests.

Many chapters are essays on birds of this state. In part II, he travels more widely offering interesting observations of Colorado, Wisconsin, the North Cascades, the Great Lakes including Isle Royale, the Porcupine Mountains wilderness, and New York at Niagara Falls. He feels the contentment that comes from a lifetime of kinship with the earth's community of life.

The sense of peace that one can feel in nature has led many of us to proceed down the road of environmental activism. Lerczak has stood at the entrance of this road but, in the end, rejected the politics and egos of agenda driven groups. This may puzzle those who are more politically engaged with environmental protection. But his reluctance overshadows the fact that, professionally, he has contributed a great deal to the actual preservation of thousands of acres of natural habitat within his home state. This is a major and enduring legacy that few are in a position to claim.

I note, in full disclosure, that Tom Lerczak was once a student in my Colorado field course. His sense of humor and earnest thoughtfulness were evident then as was the fact that he never went anywhere without his binoculars. It was clear in those days that his future career would bear watching.

Lerczak's book displays an understated, companionable style as he introduces habits and habitats in a way that will appeal to novices as well as those more expert. Each chapter is

a good stand-alone read. This book should be read by any natural history buff, and by anyone looking for ideas of places to explore, both near and far.

Review by Richard C. Keating, Research Associate at the Missouri Botanical Garden and Professor Emeritus at Southern Illinois University – Edwardsville.