

Anyone who has visited us knows that our cabin is filled with books. We never have all the shelf room we need, and there are usually volumes in other places. I must admit that we don't have a lot of order in our bookcases. We try to keep each author's work together, but that doesn't always happen. We may start out that way, but when we grab a book from a shelf, it may not always be returned to the same place.

One bookshelf, though, stays pretty neat. We do pull out the books from this area fairly regularly, but we usually put them back properly. I suppose this is because these are reference books of a kind, so when we remove a book from its place, it isn't lying around for an extended "reading." Instead, we are looking for something in particular.

The reason for this is that one shelf holds "field guides." As much as I love to read novels, biographies, history, adventure nonfiction, etc. etc. etc., these field guides may well be the most useful books in our collection. We go to them time after time, checking our knowledge of our local flora and fauna, or just browsing to increase our sense of "place" in the natural world in which we are only one of many species.

If we want to identify an unknown plant we have found in the pasture, we look in the guide to common weeds or to one of the wildflower volumes. Or, we might have to look in the book that deals with grasses, sedges, and rushes. In some cases, we might look at the small guide to invasive plants of the eastern United States.

A track in the snow or in the dirt lane leading from the road might inspire us to look in *Scats and Tracks of the Great Lakes*. Usually, though, tracks we find in these areas are familiar to us: raccoons, skunks, rabbits, turtles, snakes, or squirrels. Deer, too, of course, often cross these paths, but their tracks are very well known to anyone in our area.

When we take a hike away from the fields and pastures, we might grab the field guide to ferns to take with us. Or, if we feel like foraging a bit, we'd surely consult *Edible and Medicinal Plants of the Great Lakes*.

If I am looking for some new natural dye for the wool I have spun into yarn, I might pull out the field guide to lichens of the north woods. Or, I might browse in the handbook of natural and plant dyes.

Other books on our field guide shelf include two tree keys, Newcomb's wildflower guide (for identifying flowers by leaf shape, flower type, etc.), a book about Michigan wildlife, and another book on edible plants.

This shelf contains no bird books. This is not because we have some phobia about identifying our local birds. Rather, we have located these books in a different place. A flower or weed or a piece of grass we can bring home, lay out in front of us, and consult the appropriate guide. The birds, of course, don't lend themselves to such scrutiny. So, our bird books lie on the east windowsill, next to the binoculars. When we spot an unknown species, we can take a look with the field glasses, consult Audubon or Stokes, and, if we are lucky enough to have gotten a good look, identify the bird.

So, these field guides are some of our most-used and most-useful books. We are always on the lookout for better and more complete guides and books

that are specific to our area. After all, we live in an environment populated by many kinds of plants and animals. We do not want to be ignorant of our surroundings, and we want to know all of our neighbors, not just the human ones.