

Great “reads” for winter nights

by Candace Ward

As a nature lover I not only enjoy exploring outdoors, but I am always on the lookout for intriguing books about natural history and people who live and work in the outdoors. As we head into those long (hopefully cozy) winter nights, here are a few great nature “reads” that I recommend.

Bernd Heinrich, scientist, educator, and naturalist, has written wonderful books based on his research and personal experience outdoors in North America and northern Europe. Of his many works, I have most enjoyed *Winter World*, *Ravens in Winter*, *Mind of the Raven*, and *The Snoring Bird*.

Here is a warm-hearted excerpt from *Ravens in Winter*—“One of the raven parents finally returns and lands on a ledge just below the nest. The adult (it is a female, as I will determine shortly) stays. She bends down and with her great thick bill gently nibbles among the feathers on the top of the head of one of the young. She continues the treatment to the base of the young bird’s bill, and then she tenderly preens the tiny feathers around the eye. The youngster seems to find this treatment pleasurable because it stops fidgeting, closes its eyes, and makes soft low comfort sounds. After ten minutes she reaches over it and starts on the next, then preens the other two as methodically. All told, she works on them for over half an hour.”

Another excellent winter “read” for bear lovers is *Into Brown Bear Country* by former Kenai NWR Refuge Manager, wildlife biologist and Cooper Landing resident Will Troyer. Will shares over 50 years of his professional and personal observations and research on brown bears.

Here is a dramatic excerpt from the “Bear as Predator” chapter – “The sow, Blondie, charged to the left, but the moose turned to face the challenge. Blondie kept up her consistent harassment until for some unknown reason, the calves bolted. The cow placed herself in front of the nearest one. In a flash, Blondie saw her opportunity, rushed past the cow, and in one quick swap of her paws knocked the other calf off its feet, crushing its neck with her powerful jaws. The cow moose trotted away rapidly with the remaining offspring. Blondie uttered a few low woofs and her yearlings rushed to her side. The feast began.”

One of my all-time favorites that I have read more than once is *One Man’s Wilderness*, a modern-day Alaskan classic by Richard (Dick) Proenneke. This journal-style first-person narrative chronicles Dick’s labor of love building a log cabin solo in the Twin Lakes country of the Lake Clark region during the summer of 1968.

Dick Proenneke’s experiences observing his wildlife neighbors are wonderful. Here is a favorite excerpt—“December 22 – Wolves on the ice. I first saw them as little specks on the ice. Then the leader broke away and the others dropped back to each side to form a wide triangle. They stopped often to turn and look at the stillness surrounding them. Now they came on in at a trot. Through the spotting scope I could make out their narrow heads, erect ears, and long muzzles. I would like to see those green eyes close up. I moved. They froze like statues, 100 yards away. Suddenly one bolted nervously and loped down the ice. The others followed. Too bad I had been in the open when I first saw them. I think I could have gotten a closer look.”

One last favorite to leave you with is *Tisha* by Robert Specht, the story of a young teacher who taught in the remote Alaskan village of Chicken in 1927.

One excerpt any newcomer to Alaska can relate to is when Tisha asks Fred, “When do I stop being a Cheechako and become an Alaskan?”

He replies, “Well, some people never really become Alaskans. They never get to like it the way it is. They just tolerate it. It’s hard to explain. Maybe because it’s something you have to feel inside. All these old sourdoughs around here—they’re real Alaskans. They fought the cold, built cabins, and barely stayed alive. They were lonely, went hungry, but they made it.”

Tisha asks a universal question that many of us have pondered when Alaska has challenged us, “Do you think I’ll make it?”

To find out if she did, you’ll have to get the book at the local library, book stores in the community, or here along with the other books I mentioned at our Alaska Geographic sale outlet in the Refuge Visitor Center. Here’s wishing you great winter outings and

arm-chair adventures with these wonderful books on winter nights.

When not reading and spending time outdoors, Candace Ward is a park ranger, who leads the Informa-

tion and Education Program at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.