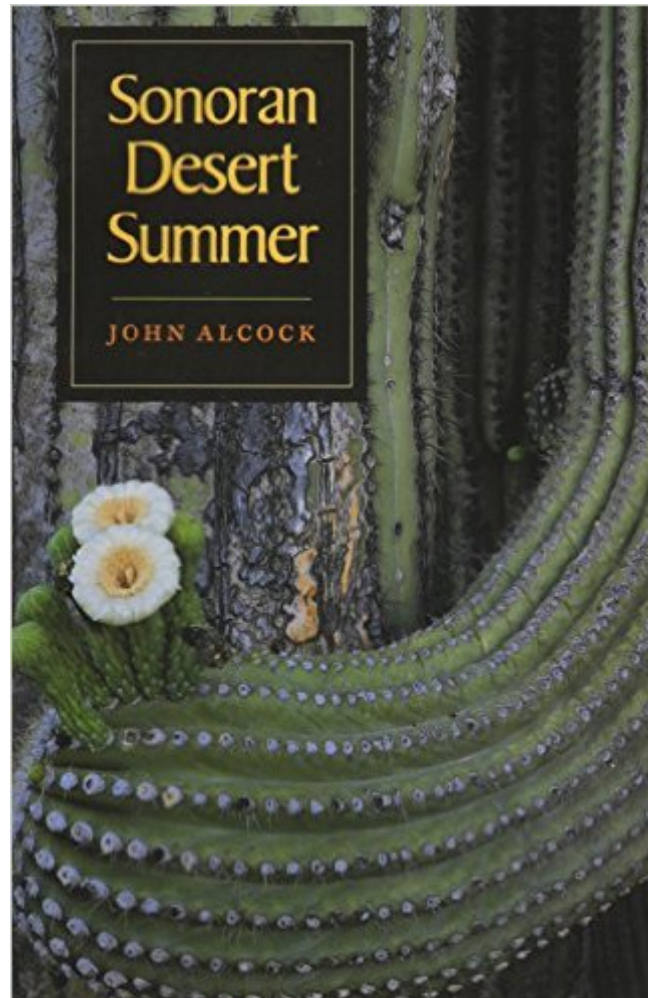


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Sonoran Desert Summer



Synopsis

What could seem less inviting than summer in the desert? For most people, this prospect conjures up the image of relentless heat and parched earth; for biologist John Alcock, summer in Arizona's Sonoran Desert represents an opportunity to investigate the wide variety of life that flourishes in one of the most extreme environments in North America. "Only very special plants and animals can survive and reproduce in a place that may receive as little as six inches of rain in a year," observes Alcock, "a place where the temperature may rise above one hundred degrees each day for months on end." Yet he and other biologists have discovered here startling signs of life hidden in plain view under the summer sun: - male digger bees compete to reach virgins underground during the early summer mating season; - the round-tailed ground squirrel goes about its business, sounding alarm calls when danger threatens its kin; - the big-jawed beetles *Dendrobias mandibularis* emerge in time to feast on saguaro fruits and to use their mandibles on rival males as well; - Harris's hawks congregate in groups, showing their affinity for polyandry and communal hunting; - robberflies mimic the appearance of the bees and wasps on which they prey; - and peccaries reveal the adaptation of their reproductive cycle to the desert's seasonal rains. The book's 38 chapters introduce readers to these and other desert animals and plants, tracing the course of the season through activities as vibrant as mating rituals and as subtle as the gradual deterioration of a fallen saguaro cactus. Enhanced by the line drawings of Marilyn Hoff Stewart, *Sonoran Desert Summer* is both an account of how modern biology operates and a celebration of the beauty and diversity that can be found in even the most unpromising places.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Sonoran Desert Summer is another of John Alcock's easy to read introductions to this desert's more fascinating creatures. The reader not only gets to experience the desert inhabitants' comings and goings during a typical summer in the Sonoran Desert, he or she does it in comfort! As informative as it is entertaining, this book gives the reader valuable insights into the wonderful adaptations of some of the desert's most interesting plants and animals. Written by a biologist who can also write, this book is fun to read, easy to digest, and makes every jaunt into the desert just that much more meaningful. And, the illustrations are charming as well. All in all, a good buy whether you are a tourist or a long-time desert rat.

The author is well qualified and a good writer but for me not enough attention paid to the vertebrate animals and too much on the insect population. I found myself getting bored and did not finish the book.

Taking up an Alcock book and following his desert jaunts is always a pleasure. His enthusiasm for the lands others call "bleak" invites imitation. Whatever view we hold for deserts must be reconsidered and assessed for validity when we close the final page. He shows us life where we perceive an empty terrain. Brief appearances by birds, insects, coyotes, even water catch his eye and are imparted to us. While the variety of life here is as vast as the landscape, one feature is brought into view repeatedly - the giant cactus saguro. This bizarre plant becomes a lodestone for his travels because its condition signals so much about conditions. "Sonoran Desert Summer" sounds intimidating, but Alcock shows how important this season is to life. Reflecting the brief jaunts Alcock takes into the Sonoran, the book is a collection of essays. The topics vary from feather structure for body temperature control through insect, bird and plant reproduction to government policies on coyotes. The wealth of detail neither obscures nor is muted by the desert's vastness - an aspect of which we are reminded on nearly every page. Mountains loom on the horizon and monsoon thunderheads build on their crests, but under this Hackberry bush a small butterfly is playing out a timeless strategy for finding a mate. Alcock misses none of it, and you feel pangs of regret that he's there and you're not. Still, he reminds us, human intrusion on desert solitudes are a destructive force. The Hohokum peoples, who inhabited this area for a duration four times longer than Europeans have inhabited the Western Hemisphere, likely irrigated themselves out of existence. Alcock, true to his role as a teacher, is full of questions. How does the Digger Bee know where to excavate to obtain a mate? Why do phainopeplas, a dark-plumaged, crested bird, nest in

solitude in Arizona but in groups in California? Why do "auxiliaries" occur in some bird species? Why does the zebra-tailed lizard wave its tail, an act likely to lure predators? Alcock doesn't whip out the answers to these conundrums, but guides you through a process of examining evidence, talking about other researchers' efforts and provides you with the most likely evolutionary solution. No aspect of a species lacks an evolutionary pathway, he reminds us. We must work it out from our time and place as best we can. What is the worth of these efforts? Do they have meaning for those of us not granted the prize of desert residence? Alcock's assessment of government policies of "pest" removal can be applied anywhere. Coyotes, despised by ranchers as despoilers of herds and by suburbanites as raiders of garbage cans, find themselves targeted for eradication. Alcock shows the short-sightedness of such policies and how to replace them with more realistic ones. Heed his warning. Humanity can't afford to lose desert life - "writing its own epitaph in the sand" along with his favoured saguro. [stephen a. haines - Ottawa, Canada]

I illustrated this book and wanted extra copies for my family. It is an interesting study of the behavior of animals and insects in the Sonoran Desert of Arizona.

Loved every word. A piece of the Sonoran Desert was my home for almost eight years. I really miss it and John Alcock helps me suffer my loss.

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