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Book Review of *A Kansas Year* by Mike Blair

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BOOK REVIEWS


Mike Blair, a longterm employee of the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks, has combined wildlife and nature photographs taken in Kansas over many years into a single “synthetic” year of images. Although Kansas by title and locale, this small-format book (6 x 9 inches) will interest a wide audience, its photos and written text relating, with a few exceptions, as much to the entire Great Plains region as to a single geopolitical entity. Individual entries are presented in a chronological sequence, January through December, not unlike an almanac, each consisting of one or two photos and a page or so of the author’s observations, reactions, and insights. Additionally, a full-page image portraying physical or biological features precedes ten titled entries for each month. Accounts are listed in the table of contents individually by descriptive title and date (e.g., Killdeer Young, May 4), a useful feature for revisiting photos and writings. The photos are excellent, my only frustration having to do with an editorial willingness, illogical but fortunately infrequent, to print images over two pages, losing a portion to the binding.

For a first impression, I paged through the photos to assess their subjects, which vary widely, and general quality, which is exceptional overall. Subsequently, I read through the written entries associated with the photos. Although small in format, A Kansas Year is a coffee-table book containing over 165 photos, which vary from less than 2 x 3 to 6 x 9 inches. Images range from wildlife to wildflowers, from lichens to landscapes to lightning,
and from insects to ice crystals. The book includes 120 accounts based in scientific knowledge (e.g., Nature’s Hieroglyphics, January 19) and Blair’s innumerable hours of observations (e.g., Shed Hunting, February 25). A sense of excitement and awe is evident in many of the accounts (e.g., Summer Thunderstorm, June 4). Further, if you grew up trying to watch or catch collared lizards, as I did in the Post Rock region of Kansas, you cannot read Blair’s account for August 15 without being transported back in time.

How should one experience this book? First, one should take the time to look at Blair’s photos as though seeing them in an art gallery, contemplating their beauty before being influenced by the text. Then one can proceed to learn more natural history, or reflect on Blair’s insights or reactions. Even so, this is not a book that needs to be read linearly; individual accounts can be enjoyed one or a few at a time and in whatever order one wishes. In fact, I suggest that the author’s comments and thoughts and associated photos are best sampled and savored in a nonlinear fashion and a few at a time.

I recommend this book to those who want to learn more about not only the natural history but also the beauty of the Great Plains. Donald W. Kaufman, Division of Biology, Kansas State University.