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Review of *This Fragile Land: A Natural History of the Nebraska Sandhills* By Paul A. Johnsgard

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This Fragile Land: A Natural History of the Nebraska Sandhills. By Paul A. Johnsgard. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. Illustrations, tables, appendices, glossary, bibliography, subject index, index to plants and animals. xv + 256 pp. \$35.00.

This Fragile Land, though written for a popular audience, is not intended for children or for light bedtime reading. In language midway between academic discourse and good literary prose, Paul Johnsgard characterizes the plant and animal communities of the Sandhills thoroughly—and with humor and imagination.

Part One describes the “geology and historical geography” of the Sandhills region and its borders; it is the only part that might be tedious for some. In his preface, Johnsgard advises readers to begin with Part Two and skip-and-sample backward. In five chapters, he details the geographic relationships of species’ habitats to one another and to the geologic features of the Sandhills themselves and the lands to the immediate north, west, south, and east. Part One is dry as blowsand, and readers who plod rather than skip may want the aid of one or two drinks.

In Part Two, Johnsgard displays his gifts as a gossip and storyteller; here we get the lowdown on the neighbors, things like the mating rituals of grebes and the surprising viciousness of the grasshopper mouse. We learn that after the male brook stickleback’s troubles in building a home, the first thing the female does is poke her head through the back wall; we learn that cliff swallows lay eggs in one another’s nests, and that their oldest colonies are so infested with bedbugs that survival chances are better out in the burbs. Even the plant world is made fascinating as the author describes the struggle of plants on the higher slopes to avoid being either buried or excavated as the wind moves sand.

Part Three consists of two cautiously-worded chapters that plead for better management of the soil and groundwater. Johnsgard remarks on Nebraska state government’s delays in implementing federal environmental law, and he tabulates the dangerously rising levels of nitrate and atrazine. But the author’s wails are muffled, and the book ends with a conciliatory paragraph in which one can almost hear the professor’s apologetic cough.

The text proper is followed by a valuable reference section that includes a substantial compilation of appendices, a fourteen page bibliography, and two indexes. Taken together, these references amount to a hundred pages or a good two-fifths of the book, and it is here that those who wish to fight environmental battles will find ammunition.

In his preface, Johnsgard says that this book is “a kind of love letter to the Nebraska Sandhills and especially to their inhabitants past and present, including people, plants, and animals.” One need only add that it is a letter arising from a mature relationship, whose passion is expressed through loving study and the careful accumulation of detail. It is ornamented with the author’s drawings and contains rich gifts in the form of tables, indexes, and appendices.

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