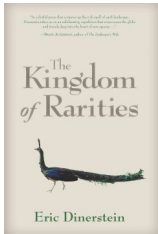


The Kingdom of Rarities

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In another life, I would love to become a wildlife biologist; it combines things I loves such as working with animals, walking, observing deeply, and travel. This book does all of the above plus makes you more curious about the flora and fauna around us. Why are robins common and not Kirtland?s warblers? Why are deer abundant and not jaguars? Eric Dinerstein, the author, started his scientific career studying tigers and later rhinoceroses. He is now Chief Scientist at the World Wildlife Fund. In *The Kingdom of Rarities*, he travels to many continents to explore the rare creatures and plants living there.

One of the places he and his scientific team visit is Irian Jaya, a remote island on the Indonesian archipelago. It combines two aspects of places that often give homes to rare creatures: remoteness, and being situated on an island. Another factor that makes Irian Jaya home to rarities is its geology?its steep mountains and gorges serve as barriers to invasive species which have become common on many other islands. The description of Dinerstein?s flight to this research spot is compelling; it was incredibly risky just to land a plane there. But well worth it because the scientists found many rare creatures quite close to them and not shy at all with humans. The scientists were amazed by how many species divided their habitats vertically. The Kirtland?s warbler is very rare, but can be found relatively close to us?at least in spring?at a jack pine forest in northern Lower Michigan near Grayling. This beautiful bird has found the harsh sandy soils under these trees a good habitat. And in a trait that is common to many rare creatures, the species is immensely loyal to one particular habitat. That as you might guess can be both a blessing and a curse. A blessing because they are absolutely adapted to the environment, a curse if the environment is being changed by humans and our activities. Another interesting trip was to rhinoceros country in Africa. As a result of his work, Dinerstein discovered that these large animals not only require a lot of space for browsing but that also need water access quite close so that the animals can cool themselves in summer. Dinerstein is particularly drawn to large rare animals. Here?s what he said about them, ?The presence of large, potentially dangerous mammals connects us to something deep and primal and teaches us humility in a way that is unique and precious.?

Sadly when discussing rare animals, the question of extinction comes up; it too is a focus of Dinerstein's research. Because he says we are at the beginning of a time of massive extinction, he suggests that we humans must develop two things: "a compassionate connection to wildlife and science-based thinking," so we can work from a state of knowledge in trying to save species. On a note of optimism, he applauds three poor countries for doing good work in animal conservation: Nepal, Namibia, and Bhutan. Not only does Dinerstein describe how jaguars, anteaters, one-horned rhinoceroses, and many rare birds live but he speaks philosophically about our connection to these wild, fascinating creatures and what they can add to our lives. For a book that focuses on one of my favorite animals, try *Elephants on the Edge: What Elephants Teach Us about Humanity* by G. A. Bradshaw.

Posted by Dory L. on July 11, 2013

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