



FROM THE FOREWORD BY STEPHEN JAY GOULD

Field narratives have certain conventions, and Mares follows them here, but with a verbal freshness (and a fine sense for a good yarn) that will delight even the most sophisticated urbanite who views Montauk Point as the ultimate wilderness. Of the two major desiderata of the genre, one must first tell terrific stories about animals—as Mares does again and again. Each reader will have a personal favorite. I was stunned by how the plains vizcacha rat of Argentina eats saltbush, when the salt crystals must first be scraped away to reach the edible leaf underneath. Two stiffened bundles of hair, shaped just like teeth, “articulate” with the lower incisors (true teeth) to chisel away the salt, which flies from the animal’s mouth in all directions. Mares comments: “Few mammals use hair to assist in gathering food. The most ready examples are the baleen whales, those massive oceanic beasts that have developed filters of modified hair—the baleen—that strain microorganisms from the sea as the whale pumps ocean water through the mouth. In one respect, the little plains vizcacha rat is a whale of a rodent.” Second, one must relate the tales of danger, biting bugs, venomous snakes, near drowning, strandings in the desert, and meetings with weird and dangerous people—the occasional but inevitable incidents that no one really loves when they are happening, but that more than repay the debt in the pleasure of later telling.

