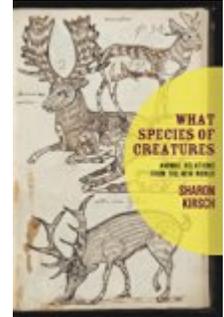


Sharon Kirsch. *What Species Of Creatures: Animal Relations from the New World.* Vancouver: New Star Books, 2008. Illustrations. 228 pp. \$16.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-55420-040-5.



Reviewed by Sean Kheraj

Published on H-Animal (July, 2010)

Commissioned by Teresa Mangum (University of Iowa)

Samuel Hearne kept beaver, otter, and a number of other species of wild animals as pets. Calling specific beaver by name, Hearne marveled at their fondness for humans and their behavior, which he found to be not unlike that of a dog. The famed eighteenth-century Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) explorer and fur trader is best known for his northwestern travels and expeditions chronicled in his heroic narrative *A Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort, in Hudson's Bay, to the Northern Ocean* (written between 1769 and 1772, published in 1795). In addition to mapping the trade territory of the HBC and establishing a number of key posts for the fur trade corporation, Hearne also recorded detailed descriptions of the New World animals he encountered on his travels. While Hearne's work for the HBC facilitated the destruction of untold numbers of beaver and other fur-bearing animals in the Northwest, he ironically developed companionships with many of these animals, which he tamed and kept as pets. This revelation marks the opening of Sharon Kirsch's

fascinating exploration of early European encounters with New World animals.

Writing about historical nonhuman animals is no easy task. Scholars in historical animal studies and environmental history must look to documents or oral histories produced by humans in order to capture a glimpse of the lives of other animals and their relations with humankind. Kirsch does just this in *What Species of Creatures*, a work of creative nonfiction that examines the relationship between New World animals and European peoples in northern North America (what is now Canada) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While these sources can only offer a human perspective on human-animal relations, they do provide insights into the place of other animals in the history of European resettlement of North America.

Kirsch opens her narrative by examining the recollections and observations of fur traders, explorers, settlers, and missionaries, like Hearne, Gabriel Sagard, Catherine Parr Traill, and Georges

Leclerc, Comte de Buffon. As mentioned above, Kirsch teases out lesser-known evidence of the companionate relations between fur traders like Hearne and the animals that provided the furs which so greatly enriched the HBC. Many early European colonists attempted to tame and domesticate New World animals (a practice that continued in Canada even into the twentieth century with state-sponsored efforts to domesticate muskox in the Northwest Territories). These efforts, it would seem, were born out of both economic interest and scientific curiosity.

The second chapter focuses on a specific species of animal that was the object of fascination for many Old World settlers in North America: the hummingbird. Known also as the "fly bird," Europeans were captivated by this unique and mysterious species of bird that exhibited many of the characteristics of an insect. Kirsch's sources, drawn from the pages of a great variety of travel and settlement narratives, including the writing of Joseph Lambert, Pierre-Francois-Xavier de Charlevoix, Nicolas Denys, and Sieur de Diereville, provide evidence of some of the earliest encounters with this peculiar bird. She adopts a similar approach in the following chapter on foxes, which explores the ways in which humans imposed different values on the foxes of the New World compared to their Old World cousins.

Chapter 4 highlights the ways that Europeans learned about New World animals through culinary experiences. Many observations recorded in these sources describe the experience of eating strange and exotic animals from beavers to rattlesnakes. In the fifth chapter, Kirsch delves into the diaries of Elizabeth Simcoe, a prominent figure in early Upper Canadian history. While not deeply concerned with her encounters with non-human animals, Kirsch provides a more general analysis of Simcoe's experiences traveling and living in Upper and Lower Canada in the late eighteenth century. Finally, the book concludes with a chapter dedicated to an examination of James

Isham, naturalist and HBC chief factor, and his book *A Vocabulary of English & Indian* (1743). Isham's descriptions of the difficulties of growing vegetables in the harsh climate at York Fort in Rupert's Land and his impressions of New World animals demonstrate yet another example described in *What Species of Creatures* of specific encounters with Alfred Crosby's concept of ecological imperialism.

Kirsch skillfully stitches together this scattered survey of European testimony and observations about encounters with New World animals with very challenging but rich prose. The text is accompanied by a very fine collection of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century hand drawings of New World animals. Since this is a work of creative nonfiction, readers should be prepared for a nonlinear narrative, punctuated by occasional asides and fictional dialogue. While this style sometimes distracts from the historical subject matter of the book, it offers a unique approach to the writing of history not found in traditional academic publications.

As a trade publication, however, Kirsch's impressive body of primary source research is obscured by an absence of extensive notations. She does include a lengthy description of her sources at the back of the book, but academic readers may find this to be unsatisfactory. This is unfortunate since Kirsch's research includes a deep collection of primary sources and a reinterpretation of some traditional documents in early Canadian history that sheds new light on human-animal relations during this period.

With its unique prose and episodic structure, *What Species of Creatures* provides an engaging, but limited, historical narrative with only tentative conclusions. Kirsch cautiously makes few definitive statements or claims about how Old World peoples approached their contact experiences with New World animals. With so few books in early Canadian history on the subject of human-animal relations, however, Kirsch's work

is a very welcome contribution that should open the door for other scholars and writers to pursue this kind of research. Her revelations and deep reading of primary source documents, like Hearne's *Journey*, should invite other historians to reexamine the relationship between Old World peoples and New World animals.

u

n

-

-

Samuel's;

c

-

four

of the's;

-

-

,

As

-

-

ed

ed

not's;

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-animal>

Citation: Sean Kheraj. Review of Kirsch, Sharon. *What Species Of Creatures: Animal Relations from the New World*. H-Animal, H-Net Reviews. July, 2010.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30743>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.