



CHARLES HOOD

In Praise of Ugly Nature

From the world of bats

**JOSÉ GABRIEL
MARTÍNEZ-FONSECA**

Four Bat Portraits

Clockwise from top left:

*Wrinkle-faced bat, Rivas,
Nicaragua, 2018*

*Fringe-lipped bat, Río San Juan,
Nicaragua, 2018*

*Common sword-nosed bat, Rivas,
Nicaragua, 2018*

*Ghost-faced bat, Masaya,
Nicaragua, 2018*

Fine Art Photography

“Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so.” This assertion, borrowed from the depressed, alcoholic, suicidal (and yet strangely compelling) poet John Berryman, has an equally disagreeable corollary, and that is that despite all the dolphins and happy puppies and alpine fields of edelweiss, nature is, on average, hideously ugly.

Besides being ugly, nature is also supremely inhospitable: mosquitoes want to give us Zika, snow wants to turn our toes black with gangrene, the average backyard raccoon would kick you in the nads and steal your car keys if it could, and if even you go into a cave to photograph bats—and trust me, I’m speaking from experience—you can expect a cascade of liquid poo as the roosting bats shit in unison all over your upturned face.

“But wait,” you say, “what about baby deer? *Those* are cute, right?” Here the internet steps in to clear things up, and we have Vox to thank for this clickbait: “You are way more likely to be killed by deer than by sharks, bears, and gators combined.” Deer also spread Lyme disease (via their ticks, but that’s no consolation when your joints flare red with arthritis), plus here’s a morbid fact: just in terms of absolute safety, if a deer jumps in front of your car, go ahead and hit it, since way more accidents happen from the veer-into-other-lane-to-avoid-it part of the interaction than from the actual strike itself. Especially along stretches of road like Highway 1 in California, it’s much better to hammer out a fender or swap in a new headlight than to swerve head-on into a busload of orphans on their way to church camp. Trust us: God will make more deer. She has plenty to go around.

If we move past the narrow world of Audubon calendars, a true appraisal of “nature” has to include all of it: the gloppy worms and bug-eyed benthic fish and back-of-the-cupboard cockroaches and one-legged seagulls and pubic lice and big-butt, naked-tailed Virginia opossums and, out in the garden, just as you are trying to weed the roses, the swollen-bellied, mandible-clicking, ass-stench-leaking Jerusalem cricket. Another name for this last repulsive insect (though hardly any more palatable) is potato bug. The Navajo name translates as “big red skull,” and, yes, they bite, painfully so. My entomology friends pretend they’re fond of them, but it’s all false bravado: this is a seriously ugly insect, and they jolly well know it.

Because I’ve been writing field guides lately and hanging out behind the scenes at natural history museums, I can tell you that the professional class of nature peddlers understands the public very clearly on this. Pandas are cute and silverfish are not. The phrase used behind closed doors and in all seriousness is *nature porn*, and the question is not whether it’s unethical to focus just on simple/pretty/uncomplicated nature, “simple” the way mac and cheese is simple, but rather, on any given page, have we included enough of it. People expect their nature scenes to look like nature scenes—to be pretty and green and with the sunlight slanting just so—and I can tell you in trying to shoot illustrations for an urban nature guide, I was asked *not* to include tagging or the tarps of the homeless encampments or the hunched solitude of herons perched on shopping carts and scanning for guppies in storm drains. Those things were there, right next to the state-sanctioned “nature” we had been sent to document, but I wasn’t supposed to include anything disagreeable in the frame. Ugly nature does not sell books.

Yet being the down-market, wrong-side-of-the-tracks vulgarian that I am, I love ugly nature. The uglier the better! That’s why I became hooked on studying bats. Just look at these portraits. Ugly little suckers, ain’t they? The beady eyes, the puckered, scrunched-up faces, the sharp teeth. Ears so big the entire animal looks like a mutant jackalope recently escaped from Chernobyl. But that in turn raises the question, ugly to whom? We assume the girl bat doesn’t have to get sloshed out of her gourd just to hook up with the boy bat, no matter what his sourpuss mug looks like to us. One problem with Bambi nature is how it implies that our human perspective—we like things seen from about five feet off the ground, with a foreground, middle ground, and far distance, in a vaguely parklike botanical setting—is the only perspective. Yet gophers and squirrels and snakes and towhees live with very different horizon lines than we do, and deer see more blue and less orange, while the kestrel’s radius of vision sweeps all the way into the ultraviolet end of the spectrum. If you pee in the pool, he can see it.

Let’s stop a moment to praise ugly nature. (1) It’s what is “there” most of the time, and seen up close, even ocelots and koalas and mega-rack trophy bucks are often loaded with ticks or are missing an ear. Ignore the ugly parts and

you miss out on 98% of the show. (2) I never liked that finger-wagging parable about the ugly duckling, but (3) as my mother used to say, you have to adore cheap wine—it’s not bad by itself, and it makes the good stuff taste all the better. (4) Ugly nature lasts longer than pretty nature. Find yourself a nice coastal lagoon, in Encinitas say, or what once was most of tidewater Virginia, and somebody will want to build a marina, a napalm factory, a power plant, a Chart House restaurant. In the exurbia of the Mojave Desert where I live, thank god everything is so ugly: because nobody else wanted it, we still have Joshua trees and dirt lots and kangaroo rats (and old sofas and shot-up refrigerators and state prisons and feral dogs). Property values are reasonable and there is plenty of nature left in and around the trash. To our good fortune, we were always too ugly to bother with.

And (5) of course “ugly” isn’t ugly at all, not really. All of nature reveals efficiency and purpose, and the elegance of the many solutions each animal demonstrates is as awe-inspiring as the rose windows at Notre Dame. When it comes to bats, I hope you don’t have a phobia, because worldwide we have well over a thousand species and they’re doing a terrific job. Keep it up, guys! Bats eat insects by the ton, pollinate flowers, disperse seeds, fertilize forests, boost real estate values in Austin, and keep underemployed park rangers on the payroll giving summer talks at Carlsbad Caverns. Some bats catch frogs; others catch fish; some bats even specialize in catching other bats, which you have to admit is some Tom Wolfean *Right Stuff* barnstorming. As most of us know by now, bats don’t spread rabies, or not any more than anything else—if you’re worried about rabies, blame the skunks in California, the foxes in Arizona, or the raccoons in Georgia.

Yes, fine, but which bat is the best one of all? I like all the bats, but my favorite kind is one from the American deserts, the pallid bat, just because it is a creamy shade of yellow and eats beetles and scorpions, plucking them right off the ground. Doing that tears up the bats’ wings, so they end up with nicks and tears, like the upholstery of a beater car. Tracking bats with my binoculars one dusk, I follow one along a ridgeline as the backlit holes shine as flickering specks of light. It dips down, I lose it, and it rises up, silhouetted again. Then, on the final upsweep, it happens: the entire animal transforms into a halo of incandescent sparks.

Let everybody else race around checking off their trogons and cardinals, their peacocks and yellow-chevroned parakeets—for me, I just want to sit in a camp chair at dusk in Joshua Tree and watch swirling patches of starlight bank and dive, sitting there quietly as one piece of the night sky inserts itself into the symphony of all the other pieces. To be honest, I may even have brought an insulated cooler with me so I can enjoy an adult beverage. My phone is off—no reception anyway—and my only job is just to be present and take it all in. The wind has died down and somewhere, far off, the coyotes are checking in with one another.

The best thing about ugly nature? By definition, it always will have room to include me.

Charles Hood’s next book, *A Californian’s Guide to the Mammals among Us*, comes out in April from Heyday Books. Upcoming animal explorations will include trips to Alaska, Tunisia, Morocco, Japan, and (in search of snow leopards) Mongolia. His day job is teaching remedial English in the Mojave Desert.

Photographer and biologist **José Gabriel Martínez-Fonseca** has photographed over 135 species of bats in the wild and is one of the best-published naturalists in Nicaragua. As he says, “If you think bats are ugly, imagine how we must look to them.” He is presently enrolled in the PhD program at Northern Arizona University.