

Review: *Outsider Animals* by Marlene Zuk

Rachel Ameen · H-Net Reviews, 2026

Who hasn't laughed at the antics of a neighborhood raccoon, or waved away a persistent gull, or angrily smushed a cockroach? Marlene Zuk unpacks our entanglements with these species and more in *Outsider Animals*, asking what we can learn from the most overlooked creatures closest to us. These 'outsider animals' upend our neat categories, raising questions about which animals belong, which are treated as pests, and which deserve our admiration or scorn. Zuk argues that, by dropping our preconceived notions and studying these animals as they are, we can learn a great deal from outsiders.

Zuk organizes her subjects into four groupings. First are the clever opportunists: raccoons and gulls, whose success exploits niches humans have inadvertently created. Second are the invaders, intruders, or visitors: brown-headed cowbirds, common mynas, and cabbage white butterflies. Each of these have found ecological success far away from their original homes, but challenge the idea of belonging. Third come the classic pests: rats and cockroaches, which force an intimacy with humans that is instructional, if not comfortable. Finally, snakes and coyotes serve as conduits to wildness, reminding us that taming nature is ultimately fruitless. Across all four groups, Zuk draws on evolutionary biology, behavioral science, and natural history to make her case, writing with a wit and accessibility that keeps the book firmly in the realm of popular science. Each chapter is a largely self-contained portrait of a particular species, but woven throughout is a broader narrative about belonging, and the role of human favoritism in assigning it.

Zuk argues that our judgments about outsider animals obscure the complicated, informative, magnificent truth of these creatures. The concept of "invasiveness" is as much a political designation as an ecological one: humans have been moving species around for millennia, and the notion of a static natural harmony preceding our interference is a myth. The chapter on common mynas makes this point, tracing how a bird imported for pest control became the target of eradication campaigns once it proved too successful at surviving. Even the raccoon, native to North America yet widely treated as a nuisance, illustrates how contingent and self-serving our categories of belonging really are. Zuk pushes back against the "ladder of animal intelligence," urging readers instead to ask how animals solve problems in ways suited to their own needs. This reframing lets us recognize new and occasionally surprising forms of animal intelligence, and reflect upon the process of choosing which animals we value and why.

This process of judgement is perhaps most visible in humans' tendency to moralize about animal behavior. Zuk returns to this theme repeatedly, but the cowbird chapter is its sharpest expression. Brood parasites by nature, cowbirds lay their eggs in the nests of other species, sometimes at lethal cost to the host's own chicks. This behavior has earned them a reputation as avian villains. Zuk

pushes back again this. The cowbird's strategy requires sophisticated planning and observation, and its evolutionary success is a testament to natural selection rather than malice. Framing survival as treachery, she argues, tells us nothing useful about cowbirds and everything about our appetite for moral narrative. The same logic applies to gulls, dismissed as greedy and annoying, or cockroaches, which inspire disgust wildly disproportionate to their actual threat. Zuk's consistent move is to strip away the epithet—pest, invader, villain—and ask what is actually going on. What emerges is a more honest, and often more interesting, picture of animals navigating a world increasingly shaped by human activity, doing exactly what natural selection equipped them to do.

Natural selection may prove to be the deciding factor for species facing an increasingly toxic and unstable climate. Outsider animals, Zuk suggests, may be precisely the species most worth watching as climates shift and ecosystems reorganize. Widely dismissed as an unwanted import, the cabbage white butterfly's resilience in the face of toxin exposure and its usefulness as a subject for studying phenological change make it a valuable indicator species. These animals' hardiness and flexibility are traits that makes them exasperating neighbors, but also better equipped to survive an environment degraded by human activity.

Outsider Animals is ambitious, covering nine different species across four subsections. Not every chapter has the same impact, and the central argument could have been made with more depth on fewer species. The chapters on birds—gulls, cowbirds, and mynas—are the highlights. Zuk does her best work when the academic data is thinnest. The abundance of existing research on rats, snakes, and coyotes offers Zuk fewer opportunities to surprise readers. Where she is forced to work harder, building an argument from a shallower data pool, her analytical voice is sharpest and her conclusions most thought provoking. The irony is fitting: a book about overlooked animals is at its best when it turns its attention to the underexamined.

This book should appeal to anyone with an interest in the overlooked animal world around us. Scholars interested in wilderness, urbanism, and animal studies should take particular note, but anyone who has ever interacted with any of the species covered by Zuk will find something to enjoy. The book's true highlights are the animal vignettes: personal interactions with snakes, gulls, raccoons and cockroaches that ground the work in a shared multispecies reality. *Outsider Animals* is a charming meander through the fringes of our urban spaces, and a thoughtful introduction to the many beings who live there.