

GIFT BOOKS

Junior Explorer Series: Your Backyard is Wild!, The Great Alaska Adventure!, The Wild, Wild Southwest!; A Wild Life: The Authorized Biography. By Jeff Corwin. 2009, 2010. Puffin Books (ISBN 0142414042; ISBN 0142414093; ISBN 0142414409; ISBN 0142414034). Each ~100 pages. Paperback. \$4.99 (Junior Explorer Series); \$6.99 (Biography).

Jeff Corwin may be known to young readers and watchers as the host of several Disney, Discovery Network, and Animal Planet shows about animals and habitats around the world. In addition to his TV work, Corwin is interested in environmental education and has become increasingly involved with conservation, having been named an Ambassador of Climate Change for Defenders of Wildlife in 2008. The books reviewed here are a few of his many publications for young readers about similar topics.

The first three books on this list are the beginning of a “Junior Explorer Series” for young readers. Featuring the Baxter family – brother and sister Benjamin and Lucy, and their scientist parents – each book focuses on a particular ecosystem. While looking primarily at the animals, the books also present some other aspects of local ecology as well as bigger issues such as extinction and climate change. These three books examine the ecosystems of Alaska, the American Southwest, and – an interesting choice! – New York City. Presented in a relatively brief format (each is about 100 pages long) and simple language appropriate for third- to fourth- grade readers, each is an appealing exploration of animals and habitats. Lucy and Benjamin introduce their city cousin Gabe to the natural wonders of his own city (ranging from Norway rats and centipedes to garter snakes and peregrine falcons) and then meet with him in the later books to observe glaciers and salmon-fishing bears, eagles and rattlesnakes. The son of two scientists, Benjamin demonstrates good scientific curiosity and care as he keeps a thoughtful journal to record sketches and notes from his days’

explorations, and asks relevant questions about what he is seeing. Full of interesting facts about the animals, their habitats, and the environment, the children and their explorations will be appealing and informative to the young reader. This series would be an appropriate choice for any young reader with a scientific curiosity.

The last book in the list above, *A Wild Life*, is the biography of Jeff Corwin’s career as a TV presenter and environmentalist. This book is less carefully constructed than those of the Junior Explorer Series, with a more sensational, TV-like tone. There are many positive messages in the details of Corwin’s life as he perseveres from academic struggles to stardom, his fascination with the natural world in the most mundane backyard as well as exotic jungles, and his increasing leadership in conservation. However, these are at times lost in the awkward writing style – especially the multiple distracting exclamation points intended to excite the reader. Jeff’s approach to the animals he is observing is at times unfortunate: it is the dramatic TV personality rather than the scientist, for example, who sees an anaconda gliding by in the water and grabs it for photographs.

Overall, the Junior Explorer Series would be a fine choice for an interested young reader; *A Wild Life*, though it has merit, is not as strong a selection.



Junior Explorer Series
A Wild Life
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Life: Extraordinary Animals, Extreme Behaviour. By Martha Holmes and Michael Gunton. 2010. University of California Press (ISBN 9780520265370). 312 pages. Hardcover. \$39.95.

Wonderful photographs, vivid descriptions, unusual organisms – that is what you will find in this book, written as a companion

to the Discovery Channel/BBC series *Life*. Over 300 color photographs vividly display the beauty and diversity of life in many different environments. The overview of the book is framed in the last sentence of the introduction: “No one really knows how many species there are today...but all have one thing in common: the drive to survive and reproduce.” The authors not only describe interesting behaviors, they also direct the reader to think about diversity and evolution in the living world and to develop an appreciation of its complexity. Some of the organisms shown in this book are familiar, such as the camouflaged cuttlefish and the tool-using chimpanzee. Others, such as the rock-climbing fish of Hawaii, which climbs (not swims) up water falls, and the lesser flamingo of Kenya, which lives in high-alkaline and high-temperature (140–150°F) areas, are not usually found in biology textbooks.

Don’t be fooled by the title – this book is not just about animal behavior! Plants are included in the chapter entitled “Irrepressible Plants.” The authors’ introduction to this chapter brings home the reason why plants are frequently neglected when behavior is discussed: “first, we tend to consider plants as rooted to the ground and therefore literally inanimate, and second, plant behavior happens so slowly that we seldom notice it.” This chapter is fascinating, with section descriptors such as “The fastest plant on the planet,” “Longevity as a solution to adversity,” and “Wind-runner.” The photographs of the landscape of Socotra in the Arabian archipelago can prompt much class discussion about adaptation and environmental pressures.

The book is composed of nine chapters: Extraordinary sea creatures; Fabulous fish; Irrepressible plants; Insect ingenuity; Frogs, serpents and dragons; Brilliant birds; Winning mammals; Hot-blooded hunters; and Intellectual primates. Each chapter begins with an overview of the topic followed by specific descriptions for the organisms shown in each chapter section. There is an introduction