

Betsy Beansprout Bird-Watching Guide

Amber Elmore

Josh Hickey, Illustrator

ShadeTree Publishing (Mar 1, 2013)

Softcover \$15.99 (46pp)

978-1-937331-25-2

Bird watching is the fastest-growing outdoor activity in the United States. According to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, almost fifty-two million Americans report that they watch birds. But what do children raised on a glut of electronic games and devices know about nature in general, and this pastime in particular?

Betsy Beansprout's Bird-Watching Guide, intended for early- to middle-grade children, is Amber Elmore's answer to this question. Published by ShadeTree Publishing, a Christian-based company "dedicated to bringing glory to God," *Betsy Beansprout's Bird-Watching Guide* is the second book in a series that teaches children how to enjoy nature.

Author Amber Elmore grew up on Watters Smith Memorial State Park in West Milford, West Virginia, where her father was park superintendent. Her books reflect the author's passion for nature. Illustrator and outdoor enthusiast Josh Hickey studied graphic arts and design at Tennessee Technology Center. His hard-edged illustrations use bright colors and cartoon-like images to depict Betsy as a millennial kid with attitude. His illustrations contrast sharply with the lovely watercolor depictions of the protagonist provided by Kasey Short in the first book in the series, *Betsy Beansprout Adventure Guide*—which is perhaps an indication that the series is moving toward a more contemporary, anime-influenced visual style.

In this book, six-year-old Betsy provides brief facts on a dozen species of birds, as well as information on bird-watching paraphernalia, the do's and don'ts of this hobby, instructions for such activities as making bird-feeder ornaments and water bottle birdhouses, and bird-related word games. This variety should appeal to young readers and simple language makes the text accessible. Also, photos of birds in the field guide section make it easy for youngsters to identify birds.

The book's organization, however, is weak. For example, activities and asides interrupt the flow of both the "Dos and Don't" section and Betsy's field guide to birds. It would have been more helpful to gather all the activities in one section. Also, the unnumbered pages are irritating and make finding particular information more difficult.

Betsy Beansprout Bird-Watching Guide likely will be most appealing to parents and home-schooling instructors interested in children's Christian education. It's curious that the author chooses this Bible passage to celebrate the greatness of our feathered friends: "Look at the birds of the air ... Are you not of more value than they?" (Matthew 6:26). Perhaps a quote from Job 35:11 would have been more apt: "Who teaches us more than the beasts of the earth, and makes us wiser than the fowls of heaven?"

NANCY WALKER (February 6, 2013)

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