

The Natural Navigator: The Rediscovered Art of Letting Nature Be Your Guide

Tristan Gooley

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Tristan Gooley has led expeditions on three continents, climbed mountains in Europe, Asia, and Africa, and flown and sailed solo across the Atlantic Ocean. A fellow at the Royal Geographic Society, he brings a wealth of experience and wide-ranging insight to the topic of navigation.

While few of us will ever come close to these lofty excursions, we still have much to learn from this captivating book. Blending history, mythology, and ancient philosophy with insights from the natural sciences and astronomy, Gooley takes the reader on an imaginative journey as he describes the subtle navigational clues to be found if we closely observe the natural world. We can orient ourselves by noting how a puddle evaporates; the warmth on the side of a boulder; the direction a tree grows and the shadow it casts; the movement of the sun, moon, and stars across the sky; or the way the wind shapes the sand on a dune or the snow on a mountainside.

While GPS, electronic compasses, and other navigational technologies have revolutionized modern travel, this book reminds us of how much richer our experience can be if we are attuned to the movement and patterns of the world around us. Appropriately, the book starts with a chapter on awakening the senses. As Gooley notes, “Sensual awareness is critical to finding our way without instruments, but it is also important if we do not want to be denied some of its texture ... Initially, achieving this heightened level of awareness requires conscious effort, but over time, the natural navigator comes to use the senses intuitively.”

The book surveys a wide range of topics, including signs found in the growth patterns of plants, the sea and tides, layers of wind and clouds, and the motion of birds, insects, and other creatures. Not surprisingly, about a third of *The Natural Navigator* deals with the sky and celestial sphere, as Gooley crisply explains how the movement of the sun, moon, and stars reflects the season and latitude. Though written for a novice, these sections will also be instructive to those who already have a working knowledge of astronomy. We learn practical tips on using the Big Dipper to locate the North Star, but we are also told that where Americans see the Big Dipper, the British see a Plough, the Inuit see a Caribou, and the Aztecs saw the destructive god Tezcatlipoca, a trickster who disguised himself to lead the virtuous astray. The cultural threads seamlessly intertwined through the book remind us of how, across history, man has worked to find his place in the universe, physically and perhaps even metaphysically.

Part of the book’s charm comes in the personal stories the author shares, often revealing a gentle humor. Gooley’s childhood pet, Muggles, a schnauzer, intelligent but with poor eyesight and a terrible sense of smell, was lost for several days, but she somehow found her way to the house of a family friend three miles away. The tale serves as an example of the mysteries that still surround aspects of animal navigation. Similarly, the book closes with a story that shows this natural navigator in his element—on vacation with his wife in a seaside village. The author is attentive to the shifting breeze, the curved trunk of a churchyard yew, the sun setting a little north of west, the quarter moon pointing to the south, and the scent of fish and chips, which lead Gooley and his wife to a pub for dinner.

A few of these navigational principles may be familiar turf to some readers, but Gooley’s enthusiasm is catching and this book, packed with countless tips, insights, and stories, will appeal to a wide audience. The writer’s style is friendly, entertaining, and often thought-provoking. Whether we’re embarking on an evening stroll through the neighborhood, a hike in the woods, or a sail on open waters, the natural evidence that surrounds us reminds us of our place in the world.(June) KRISTEN RABE

Kristen Rabe is general director, Internal Communications, for BNSF Railway, where she oversees the company's publications, video, and digital communication. She has a Master of Arts in English Literature from the University of Virginia.

KRISTEN RABE (Fall 2012)

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