



A Coastal Companion:

A Year in the Gulf of Maine, from Cape Cod to Canada

by Catherine Schmitt, illustrated by Kimberleigh Martul-March and Margaret Campbell

Softcover, 250 pages, \$20

Tilbury House (www.tilburyhouse.com), 2008

CATHERINE SCHMITT, a science writer for the Maine Sea Grant College Program, has successfully and uniquely combined science, literature, and art in her new book, *A Coastal Companion*. But it's the way she combines these elements that makes it such a well-crafted book.

Schmitt ably connects her observations of the natural world to human lives, both in a philosophical, big-picture way and in an ordinary, micro way that highlights the particular. For instance, in a passage about autumn, we have this—“While you are sleeping, a river of birds is flowing in the sky....”—a simple daily, human action connected to nature’s ongoing movements.

When she describes the dynamics of wave action (“...like spinning wheels stacked on top of one another...”), how thunderstorms are created, or what luminescence in seawater is, Schmitt’s explanations are appealing and elegant. As a result, the science is never wearying. Just when you’ve absorbed enough geological or biological facts, she offers a respite with a literary quote or a poem—a perfect orchestration.

Schmitt writes clear, unfussy descriptions of the mysteries and phenomena of real life. Consider, for example, this entry about August: “The Perseid is one of the best meteor showers to watch, since the night is warm enough to lie on a dark beach far from the glare of city lights, at the edge of a midnight sea, with all the universe before your eyes.” Or this, about winter:

“Each snowflake is like a Tibetan sand mandala, an intricate work of love and art, only to be dismantled upon completion.” Or this, about the end of winter: “By winter’s end the marsh may look tattered and damaged, a reflection of our own cathartic feelings: we are beaten down by winter, but will be stronger for it in the end, and like the marsh we will recover come spring.”

She deftly ties adjacent entries together by word themes, as with these subheads: “Fire in the Sky” (Perseid meteor shower); “Fire at Sea” (St. Elmo’s fire dancing on a boat’s mast after a thunderstorm); and “Fire on the Horizon” (the green flash at sunset).

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was brilliant. The illustrations, by Kimberleigh Martul-March and Margaret Campbell, depict coastal landscapes, harbors, marine life (including some rather unhandsome fish), birds, and whale tails poking through whitecaps. The simple line drawings used as chapter openers simultaneously have a contemporary edge, a classic feel, and a woodcut quality. I would have preferred, however, that the text spell out which artist was responsible for which drawings.

Throughout the book are quotes by writers who either lived in Maine or around the Gulf of Maine or simply wrote about the sea and its shore. The work of contemporary Maine poets is included, as well as that of poets past, among them E.B. White, Henry David

Thoreau, and Ruth Moore. Birthdays of artists, scientists, and writers are noted with brief descriptions of their connection to the sea or the coast of Maine—Rockwell Kent, Jacques Cousteau, and Andrew Wyeth are a few named.

There are similarities between this book and the work of Rob McCall. (McCall is the author of “The Awanadjo Almanack” department in this magazine, and of the book *Small Misty Mountain*). Both Schmitt and McCall use an almanac style to note changes in the seasons through descriptions of plant life, creatures, and weather—*A Coastal Companion* has a passage for every day of the year. Schmitt is weighted toward more scientific explanations—her true strength—with a light philosophical touch sans theology, and

her style is less wry than McCall’s. But a direct comparison isn’t fair, really. It’s like two watercolor painters who each might paint the sea, but in a completely unique way.

Since the back cover of *A Coastal Companion* recommends, “This is a book to keep close at hand, to be read not all at once, but through the seasons, one day at a time, and enjoyed year after year,” it could be made even more reader friendly for that in a future edition. A suggestion: make each day’s passage its own page, with those wonderful drawings, of course. But in any format, this exquisite book belongs on the nightstand, on the kitchen table, in the boat’s cabin, or at the beach.

—Linda Hedman Beyus 