The Great Outdoors

BY DOMINIQUE BROWNING

Vajajoguta's seductive wild AMBIANCE, OFFERS & AWAITS in Nature (Windhorse, paper, $12.95) might inspire you to drop everything and tramp across the ferns. Or settle into your pillows with this hectic, thoughtful and important memoir, setting off on a journey into stillness and contemplation. Orlded into a Buddhist hermit in 1974, Vajajoguta began a practice of annual solitude retreats, each decade, beginning in a cavern by the sea in Wales. There he found "scarf-looking sheep, wind-washed gorse, wind-swept ash." And "a whole new person I had never really met before - me." In Spain and Scotland, across Cornwall and Cumbria, Vajajoguta makes, in tweecky sentences with the eyes of a poetry lover, a "dark turn of sadpoles," the glisten of trens of thousands of pale-pink jellyfish washed up on a beach. Alas, one night, a huge boulder broke off and slid down an escarpment, snatching wastefully short of crushing his cabin. All is not sitting, either, though the retreats began as a way of prolonging meditation, practicing "disciplined illness." Vajajoguta begins to walk further and further, composing his fear of being lost, meeting his own stillness, until the walks themselves become the meditation. He wants to assure the death of his future, walks both in quiet and expand his mind. And he becomes "astounded by how alive" the places he visits are. He urges us to imagine the lives of other creatures as best we can, "to be intimate with all things" as a Zen master puts it. His blood pressure may rise within the forest, but Vajajoguta demonstrates that the muscle of reverence - and the habits of regeneration - exercised through a sustained empathic mingling with the natural world will serve you for a lifetime. "It was a matter of love," Vajajoguta says. Learning to be connected with life's necessary - for the sake of nature too. That's the message from Martin Tuttle, the founder of that Conservation International. This new edition of his 1996 book, THE SECRETS LIVES OF BATS: My Adventures with the World's Most Misunderstood Mammals (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, paper, $12.95) is proof that teenage passion can change the world. One afternoon in Austin, Tex., in the mid-1800s, more than a million Brazilian free-tailed bats moved into crevices under a bridge near the State Capitol. People panicked and called for the bats' extermination. Never mind that they could consume 15 tons of insects nightly. Abruptly, the headlines. Tuttle resigned his position with the Milwaukee Public Museum and moved to Texas to rescue the bats, meeting with city officials to convince them that "bats make wonderful neighbors." Within a few years, the mayor announced that Austin was the hot capital of America, now attracting news about bats to zillions of tourists. The bats of Mexico are now considered a natural resource. Tuttle and his father, a high school biology teacher, began exploring caves in his hometown near Knoxville, Tenn. Today, Tuttle is a biology teacher in the University of Tennessee, with hundreds of students studying bats. He is also a co-founder and president of Bat Conservation International, the world's largest organization dedicated to the conservation of bats. Tuttle's book is a must-read for anyone interested in bats and their conservation.