



Diary of a Citizen Scientist: Chasing Tiger Beetles and Other New Ways of Engaging the World

Sharman Apt Russell

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Winner of the 2015 John Burroughs Medal, the 2015 WILLA Award for Best Creative Nonfiction, and finalist for the 2015 New Mexico/Arizona Book Awards

In the exploding world of citizen science, hundreds of thousands of volunteers are monitoring climate change, tracking bird migrations, finding stardust for NASA, and excavating mastodons. The sheer number of citizen scientists, combined with new technology, has begun to shape how research gets done. Non-professionals become acknowledged experts: dentists turn into astronomers and accountants into botanists.

Diary of a Citizen Scientist is a timely exploration of the phenomenon of citizen science, told through the lens of nature writer Sharman Apt Russell's yearlong study of a little-known species, the Western red-bellied tiger beetle. In a voice both humorous and lyrical, Russell recounts her persistent and joyful tracking of an insect she calls "charismatic," "elegant," and "fierce." Patrolling the Gila River in southwestern New Mexico, collector's net in hand, she negotiates the realities of climate change even as she celebrates the beauty of a still-wild and rural landscape.

Russell's self-awareness—of her occasionally-misplaced confidence, her quest to fill in "that blank spot on the map of tiger beetles," and her desire to become newly engaged in her life—creates a portrait not only of the tiger beetle she tracks, but of the mindset behind self-driven scientific inquiry. Falling in love with the diversity of citizen science, she participates in crowdsourcing programs that range from cataloguing galaxies to monitoring the phenology of native plants, applauds the growing role of citizen science in environmental activism, and marvels at the profusion of projects around the world.

Diary of a Citizen Scientist offers its readers a glimpse into the transformative properties of citizen science—and documents the transformation of the field as a whole.

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