

## UNIQUE NON-FICTION PICTURE BOOKS

**The snowy owl.** Joseph Levesque. Illus. Pierre Jarry. Trans. Tim Wynne-Jones. Quintin Publishers, 1991. 24 pp., \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 2-920438-41-7; **The louse.** Colette Dufresne. Illus. May Rousseau. Trans. Tim Wynne-Jones. Quintin Publishers, 1991. 24 pp., \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 2-920438-40-9. **Family album.** Stéphane Poulin. Quintin Publishers, 1991. 24 pp., \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 2-920438-91-3; **Animals in winter.** Stéphane Poulin. Quintin Publishers, 1991. 24 pp., \$12.95 cloth. ISBN 2-920438-39-5.

Lighthearted and informal in tone, these non-fiction picture books offer a unique presentation of animals for children three to eight years of age. Illustration serves as a humorous sub-text that can be appreciated by young readers.

The *Fauna in colour* series, which concentrates on individual animals, contains eight books, two of which have been translated from French to English, *The snowy owl* illustrated by Pierre Jarry, and *The louse*, illustrated by May Rousseau.

In *The snowy owl*, children learn basic information about the owl's habits, life cycle, physical characteristics, brood sizes, and method of searching for food. Although the information is carefully selected, the verse structure presents difficulties. Three to five-year-olds, in particular, may have problems remembering the salient points because of the way words and phrases are arranged in the text. For example:

The brood can be ten or twelve chicks, that's a lot,  
When food is abundant, but when it is not,  
In years when supplies for the owls are too few,  
A female might lay just one egg or two.

The comma placed at the end of the first line makes smooth reading difficult, even for an adult. The rhyme scheme is inconsistent, and at times is abandoned altogether:

First owl hears its prey,  
Well before having seen it,  
Its hearing's so keen it  
Picks up feeble squeaks.

An over-abundance of pronouns confuses the issue of who's who. The illustration is equally baffling at this point. The lemming, who is the prey, is not depicted as squeaking feebly. He is singing into a microphone and standing on a pedestal very near to the owl. Large musical notations above the lemming's head signal how loudly he makes his presence known, and though humorous, does little to suggest that the owl's hearing is sharp. Instead, the picture suggests

that the lemming is making a show of himself, much to his own peril.

Despite these peculiarities, the text does stress key action words to which children will respond with vigour. Words like “swoosh,” with its triple “o’s,” “gulps,” and “swallows” are stimulating to the sense. The stylized illustrations are detailed enough to engage mildly the interest of eight-year olds, and colourful enough to hold the attention of younger readers.

*The louse* is a book to be lauded more for its idea than for its end result. Children learn about the different kinds of lice, their life-cycle, how they spread and what they feed on. The topic itself is much needed in schools and day-cares. The double-page spreads are humorous, even silly. Lice are depicted riding on skateboards on the backs of animals, or lying in the sun. A lice-ridden pig is shown reading a book with a picture of a louse on the cover dressed as a vampire. Unnerving, however, is when lice are described as multiplying:

It’s by direct contact lice multiply,  
On a comb or a pillow they hop a free ride.  
So if a friend lends you her teddy, that’s nice,  
But your friend may also have lent you some lice!

The point, though valid, is made in a heavy-handed manner. The suggestion that a child should reconsider hugging her friend’s teddy is absurd and just plain offensive. The depiction of newly-hatched lice, complete with baby soothers, though funny, provides little comfort.

In addition, the text makes no effort to dispel unnecessary feelings of shame and humiliation children and their parents often experience with a case of head-lice. The opportunity to provide additional information and reassurance on just how easy it is to get rid of pests with a medicated shampoo has been curiously missed. Instead, readers are left with little more than an acute sensation of the “creepy-crawlies.”

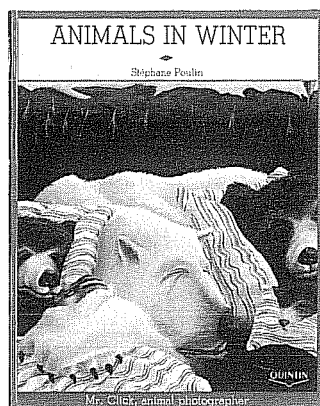
Stéphane Poulin’s “Mr. Click, Animal Photographer” series is the most satisfying of these non-fiction books. It is fun and informative at a basic level for junior readers. Both *Family album* and *Animals in winter* won awards for the illustrations (in the French edition) in 1986 and 1987. Both books explore animal classifications as invented by the famous naturalist Carl Von Linne.

In *Family album*, readers see the family of animals through Mr. Click’s eyes. He shows pictures of his travels from the North Pole to the South Pole. The result is a souvenir album. The inventiveness of the illustrations gives memorable spice to Poulin’s subject matter. Children can grasp easily the sidekicks of humour as Mr. Click diligently works at getting the best pictures he can. In *Animals in winter*, Mr. Click returns from another photo safari in which he has studied what wild animals do in winter. The illustrations are even more humorous and subtle as he discusses, in one-line blurbs for his double-page spreads, camouflage, migration, dormancy, hibernation, and more. A handy summary of the facts is given at the end of both books, as well as a glossary which

identifies each animal in the illustrations.

The boldly-coloured pictures, large print, limited text with meticulously selected detail, humour, and, of course, fact combine overall to make the "Mr. Click, Animal Photographer" series unique and appealing. The humour, in particular, gives these books a fresh and sophisticated edge, seldom seen in non-fiction books about animals for young children.

**Sheila O'Hearn** is a free-lance writer and assistant librarian at the Fergus Public Library, Children's Services. Currently, she has a children's book review column in the Wellington advertiser.



## INVENTIVE INSECT AS HERO

**Wickiup Walkingstick.** Anne Macdonald. Illus. Elaine Blier. Red Deer College Press, 1991. Unpag., \$11.95, cloth. ISBN 0-88995-063-6.

Wickiup is a small, green insect known as a walkingstick. He is accidentally sprayed with orange paint by a passing tree-cutter who is marking trees, thus losing his protective camouflage and exposing him to dangers such as hungry birds. Eventually, he uses cunning to regain his inconspicuous green colour in the same manner as he lost it. The theme is one of survival, based on Wickiup's ability to hide from his enemies through his green camouflage.

This book, with its quickly-paced narrative, is targeted for six- to ten-year-olds. The crisis is introduced early as Wickiup's back is sprayed, and the sense of his danger is well developed in Macdonald's descriptions of the pursuing bird's swooping attacks. Once Wickiup regains his original colour, the book ends rather abruptly with a parting comment on Wickiup's cleverness.

Wickiup is an interesting choice of hero: an insect protagonist is original and refreshing. Macdonald obviously feels no need to use "cute" animals to generate the reader's sympathies, especially within the context of environmental concerns or the theme of survival. This story also involves the relationship of Nature and humans. Again, Macdonald avoids stereotypes such as people against Nature. Humans here are not bumbling clods or maliciously destructive; they appreciate and work to maintain Nature. Unconsciously, however, they affect the life of one of Nature's smaller members.

Wickiup's habitat is represented not through words, but through illustrations. Elaine Blier employs a palette of pastel greens and soft browns. The colours rarely contrast in tone; Blier appears to be making a statement about the serenity