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## “Naturalist Illuminates World of the Night”

By ANDI RIERDEN

New York Times

DIANA KAPPEL-SMITH settled into a wing-back chair and began describing a five-month journey through a world of darkness. Leaving her home in Rowayton, she traveled in search of alligators in Louisiana kangaroo rats in Arizona, coyotes in North Dakota, octopuses in Hawaii and brown bats in Connecticut.

The chronicle of this bustling nocturnal world, told in Ms. Kappel-Smith's armchair style, is the focus of her new book, "Night Life: Nature From Dusk to Dawn," (Little, Brown & Company). Peppared with natural history and anecdotes, the book covers five disparate American landscapes from remote deserts to the suburban woods near her mother's home in New Canaan, which "is richer in wildlife than many a chunk of virgin forest," Ms. Kappel-Smith wrote.

Reviewers have placed "Night Life" in the same league with the nature writings of Annie Dillard, who lives in Middletown, and Aldo Leopold's classic "Sand Country Almanac." Comparisons to such revered writers have taken her by surprise, said Ms. Kappel-Smith, a former newspaper reporter who until a few years ago owned a 245-acre farm in Vermont. She moved back to Connecticut in 1986 with her son, Coultor, who is now 10 years old.

"It's funny," she said in an interview at her home, "while I was writing the book, I'd tell people that it was about shrews and salamanders and other animals, and they'd immediately change the subject. I began to wonder if I was the only one interested in such things."

Ms. Kappel-Smith, a soft-spoken woman with serene blue eyes and an effortless laugh, began her study of nighttime life in Connecticut by asking 20 neighbors for permission to conduct research on their property. One woman, convinced that the writer was trying to sell her something, refused to believe her motives.

"She kept asking me why I would want to go wandering around the dark looking for animals," Ms. Kappel-Smith said. "And I said, 'Why not?' "

Using her mother's garden shed as a laboratory, she ventured into the woods after dusk and sometimes stayed until dawn. She took pens and paper, a tape recorder, traps that would not harm her subjects, bait of bananas, brown sugar and beer and a flashlight covered with a red gel.

"Animals don't see red very well," she explained. "That way you can see them but they can't see you."

During her treks, Ms. Kappel-Smith stumbled upon short-tailed shrews, voles, field mice, foxes, owls and bats. Whatever she would catch in her traps she would carry in a cloth bag to her field laboratory to observe or draw, then release. The book is full of her wildlife illustrations.

### Echoes in the Woods

The book's narrative moves smoothly from the factual to reflections like this: "The size of starred sky and dark rolling ground makes me think of things more durable than myself."

Part of her search for Connecticut creatures took her into the woods where she used to play as a child. "There are many echoes," she said. Even in those days, she said, she built terrariums for the beetles she found rummaging in the dirt, and she loved to identify bird songs.

"I was the type of kid who always had a frog in her pocket," she said.

Her father, Albert Kappel, who died in 1986, was a major influence. He was the founder of the New Canaan Audubon Society. "He was never a great birder or naturalist, nor did he have a science background," she said. "But he understood very well that people were making a mess of the environment."

After earning a biology degree from the University of Vermont in the mid-70's, Ms. Kappel-Smith worked as a reporter for a rural newspaper in the northern part of the state. With her sister, she bought a farm and raised sheep. She married a neighbor and had a son. When the marriage ended a few years later, she remained on the farm and began to think seriously about going to medical school or becoming a writer.

"I opted for a writing career, because I knew that way I could adjust my schedule so that I could be here for my son," she said. "I wanted to be a mother, not just a manager."

Combining her science background with her expertise as a field researcher for a local botanist, Ms. Kappel-Smith wrote three articles on winter animal and plant life for Blair and Ketchum's Country Journal in 1979 and 1980. The pieces were later published as her first book, "Wintering," (McGraw-Hill, 1984), which established her reputation as a nature writer.

Describing her approach to nature writing, she said: "I've never been interested in anthropomorphizing animals, because that makes them seem like negative, efficient little people. What I am interested in, though, is not that they're little people, but that I am an animal."

### Sources of Fear

In preparing the outline for "Night Life," she compiled a list of nocturnal animals along with five distinctive places in the United States where they could be found. She then cut out each subject's name and threw the bits into an old herb bowl. When she completed researching each topic, she took the word out and threw it away until the bowl was empty.

While she was traipsing through the wilderness at night, she said, a rustle or animal sound would send shivers through her, forcing her to sit down until the frightened feeling subsided. There were other sources of fear desert snakes in Arizona, domestic dogs in Connecticut.

"What happens in the dark is that we feel lost, out of it," she said. "Our vision doesn't work well. We can't walk as well. You take an animal out of its natural environment, and it's going to be scared. And night is not our natural environment, so we get scared in it and invariably find some demon. Feeling scared at night is nature's way of saying that you don't belong here."

Yet in most instances, she tried not to rely on a flashlight, she said, but waited until her vision adjusted to the light.

"It's like watching a crummy black-and-white TV," she said, "but much better than a flashlight, because once you turn that on, you can see only what's beaming, but you lose everything else."

### Coyote's Tracks

People presented other obstacles. As part of her research on coyotes, she contacted fur trappers in North Dakota, assuming that they would know more than most about the animals. But because of the pressure on the trapping industry by conservation and animal-rights groups, the last person they wanted to see "was some lady writer from the East Coast," she said.

After persuading one master trapper that she simply wanted to observe, he invited her to conduct her research on his family farm in the Badlands. Although she never came face-to-face with one of the secretive coyotes, the trapper helped her reconstruct a night in the animal's life by following its tracks.

From the winter prairie, she plunged into the bustling, underwater night off the coast of Oahu. Just a few feet from a night octopus, she wrote: "I watch that pulsing jet of water-breath, which looks like a raw aorta, right there where a carotid should be. Those two eyes, staring; I stare back. That big-nosed face looks like a trunkless elephant head but is really a belly. There's a beak between their legs and they can bite: I don't forget this."

In the Louisiana bayou, she relied on the wisdom of game wardens to round up alligators.

Initially, however, the men were skeptical about having her on board the search boats. "They decided I was O.K. once they figured out I wasn't bothered by mosquitoes," recalled Ms. Kappel-Smith, who brought back a mosquito switch made from palmetto leaves that now hangs in her study.

For the last two years, she has lived in this sun-drenched cottage not far from a salt marsh. Her home is filled with touches of antique china, exotic plants and a portrait of her great-grandmother. She said her animated, friendly neighborhood "keeps me from being too reclusive."

Ms. Kappel-Smith is currently researching a new book on the desert wildlife of New Mexico and Arizona. It will be another mix of scientific description and personal reflection.

"I'm an old-fashioned naturalist," she said. "It's a job requiring that you keep your eyes wide open. Trouble is, that you can never keep them open wide enough."

Photo; Diana Kappel-Smith, author of a book on nocturnal animals, near her home in Rowayton (NYT/Rollin A. Riggs)

#### QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS, ANSWER, AND CONSIDER

1. How does Diana find inspiration for her writing?
2. Why is Diana referred to as a "naturalist"? What does this word mean? What does it imply or connote? List ten naturalists you know or have read about.
3. What sort of advice does Diana offer in this brief interview? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
4. What do you think would be the most challenging part of Diana's life for you, personally? Why?
5. What did you learn about darkness and light from Diana? What do you find charming or fascinating about night?