

Book Review: Hop aboard to explore around globe

**By CHRIS RUBICH
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Montana author Marty Essen's "Cool Creatures, Hot Planet: Exploring the Seven Continents" is part-travelogue, part nature exploit, part plea for caring for the plants and animals with whom we share the Earth and all adventure.

The book, about visiting each of the continents, is written for adults. But teens and late-grade-school readers who like critters of all kinds will enjoy exploring alongside Essen and his wife, Deb. And they'll get lessons in science, geography and the environment without even realizing it.

The book does have a few adult words, but no more than kids are exposed to on regular TV.

Much of the book's appeal is Essen's enthusiasm for what he sees and how it affects him. His is a voice of joyful discovery on almost every day in remote locations from Belize to Borneo, the Antarctic to Zimbabwe's Zambezi River.

Essen rises early and boldly goes forth in hopes of finding spiders and snakes - and other wild creatures on continent after continent over 3-1/2-years.

"As our horseback ride continued, I scanned the jungle, hoping to spot a snake, toucan, monkey - or any other animal for that matter," Essen writes of his journey in Belize.

He hopes to photograph many creatures that work at not being seen by, let alone posing for humans who venture into jungles, wild rivers, the desert and other habitats. And the 455-page book includes dozens of color photos, such as a tree-hugging Boyd's forest dragon from Australia, a coin-sized poison dart frog from the Amazon, porcupine caribou migrating in Canada, penguins and elephant seals of the Antarctic, snakes from several sites and more.

The shots of plants testify to the world's diversity.

A stand-out element of Essen's writing is his humor. As he and Deb find a "bird-watcher's paradise" in Belize, they're delighted to see varieties common to our country.

"Then," he writes, "we reminded ourselves: Birds have to go somewhere when they fly south for the winter."

Part of his quest is to spot and photograph a fer-de-lance, one of the world's deadliest snakes. He fulfills that goal, which most folks would never attempt.

But he makes it clear that he has his fears, including his wife's beloved diving to view the underwater

world.

His descriptions of struggling with that and other challenges assure the reader that Essen is human, too.

The travels require some very basic transport, such as canoes and lots of hiking through muck and mud.

Often, a sense of beauty contrasts dramatically with moments of danger.

He describes a huge spider's colorful body that "would have made a great Christmas tree ornament." But that beauty strikes him only after he imagines the spider as a deadly creature worthy of his invented name of Belizean fangs-o-death and before he realizes that he's surrounded by many similar webs and their occupants.

Fellow Western Montana adventure author Peter Stark wrote about the constant danger of hippos in his book about traveling a river in Africa, and Essen, too, finds misadventure with the giant animals that most people think of as harmless. Not so, when a hippo emerges from a cooling dip in waters and munches through the canoe in which Essen and his wife are traveling in Zimbabwe and tosses them out.

Essen's colorful and descriptive writing conveys the excitement of the best TV wildlife-adventure shows.

His personality comes through strongly, as do some political views about how we treat - or mistreat - our planet.

As the travels come to an end, you hope for one last adventure, one final hunt for what slithers through the tall grasses or hangs almost hidden from a nearby branch. And the reader hopes that Essen gets the itch to explore a bit more and share what he finds.

"Cool Creatures, Hot Planet: Exploring the Seven Continents"

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