



## The Species Seekers: Heroes, Fools, and the Mad Pursuit of Life on Earth

By Richard Conniff

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**“This beautifully written book has the verve of an adventure story.”?Wall Street Journal**

From the mid-eighteenth century to the early twentieth, a colorful band of amateur naturalists explored the most perilous corners of the planet to discover new life-forms. Amid globe-spanning tales of adventure, Richard Conniff recounts a dramatic historical shift, as humans finally discovered the pantheon of life on Earth-and our place within it. 36 black-and-white illustrations

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## **Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Until about 1834, the word "scientist" didn't exist. According to naturalist Conniff (*Swimming with Piranhas at Feeding Time*), it was likely at a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science) where a member, following the model of "artist" and "atheist," coined a new term--"scientist" reflecting the transition of the nascent study of plants and animals from self-educated hobbyists to a new breed of professional. The author blows the fusty dust of centuries off an exhaustive bibliography of almost 300 books, many published in the 1800s. Conniff tells a fresh story that begins with Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus's creation of a species classification system in 1735, through Darwin's development of the theory of evolution--and of how, then as now, it was a challenge to religious orthodoxy--to the present as new species continue to be discovered, including in this decade a striped rabbit in the Mekong Delta. Conniff's parade of pioneers whose colorful exploits are recounted is at times overwhelming, but this history of the "great age of discovery" is spellbinding. (Nov.) (c)

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From [Booklist](#)

Conniff (*Swimming with Piranhas at Feeding Time*, 2009) here offers portraits of specimen collectors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Counting many eccentrics among their number, Conniff's cohort was enticed by the landscape of potential discovery and the low barriers of entry into the profession. A net, a gun, and enthusiasm sufficed in the beginning. Greater success depended on chance variations ranging from the species hunter's personality to his connections with gatekeepers of natural history, ensuring a fickleness of fate that Conniff develops into a series of dramas. John James Audubon needs no explanation, but an acquaintance of his, "a brilliant crackpot named Constantine Rafinesque," represents the time's mania to be the first to find new species. An antithesis to the Rafinesques are the taxidermists and descriptive classifiers of collectors' hauls, and Conniff recounts their progress in making systematic sense of botany and zoology, which was crowned by two collectors who cracked the evolutionary code, Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace. Illustrated with Conniff's cast, this work reliably engages the history-of-science readership. --  
Gilbert Taylor

Review

"[Conniff's] enthusiasm for his subject and admiration of these explorers is infectious . . . an entertaining survey." (Kirkus Reviews)

"[This] history of the 'great age of discovery' is spellbinding." (Publishers Weekly)

"An anecdotal romp through the strange history of naturalism. Absurd characters, exciting discoveries, and fierce rivalries abound." (Outside Magazine)

"An enduring story bursting at the seams with intriguing, fantastical and disturbing anecdotes." (New Scientist)

"[Conniff] chronicles two centuries of adventure, and at the same time illustrates important developments in human thought." (Christian Science Monitor)

"A swashbuckling romp...brilliantly evokes that just-before Darwin era." (BBC Focus)

“Modern biology and medicine would not be what they are today if not for the death-defying naturalists who set out to travel the world and find new species. In *The Species Seekers*, Richard Conniff creates a marvelous rogues’ gallery of these brave, sometimes reckless heroes of taxonomy, full of surprising tales of gorillas, platypuses, and disease-laden mosquitoes.” (Carl Zimmer, author of *Parasite Rex*)

“A marvelous tribute to the age of wonder.” (Bernd Heinrich, author of *The Nesting Season*)

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