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Review of Deep Alberta: Fossil Facts and Dinosaur Digs

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Deep Alberta: Fossil Facts and Dinosaur Digs. By John Acorn. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2007. xii + 186 pp. Map, photographs, illustrations, glossary, references, index. \$26.95 paper.

We tend to rate smarter animals, like crows and naturalists, by their degree of behavioral versatility. If polymathic interest correlates with intellect, John Acorn is a very bright naturalist indeed. He has written field guides to insects and birds of Alberta's prairies, mountains, and badlands. His versatility emerges through media popularization of these topics, in series like *The Nature Nut* and more recently *Deep Alberta*, a set of radio vignettes about Alberta's fossilized past. But does Acorn's range skim the surface like a light breeze, or does his insight scour deep to Cretaceous bedrock? Judging by Acorn's *Deep Alberta: Fossil Facts and Dinosaur Digs*, the answer, happily, is both.

One striking aspect of Alberta's Great Plains is their abrupt absence when the landscape drops suddenly into rapidly eroding badlands nearly bereft of the vegetation and animal life seen at prairie level. In 80 episodic profiles derived from his radio series, Acorn describes the physiography of the badlands and other geological regions Alberta, and primarily the fossil animals and plants that the land divulges (often grudgingly) to excavating paleontologists. The textual profiles almost invariably face excellent photographs and drawings, aside from rare dodgy or incongruous renderings of extinct fauna. The badlands photographs capture their changing character at different times of the day (contrast the haze on page x with the page 52 photo of Dinosaur Provincial Park at sunset). Photographs of fossil specimens are among the best representations I have seen of them, and reprintings of other figures are often better than in their original publications.

The high production values extend to Acorn's writing. Breezy, conversational humor makes the profundity of geologic time, biological complexity, and dinosaurian terror go down easily. He writes as engagingly about the dawn redwood forests of Cretaceous Alberta and modern

China as about fossilized coral and naming extinct creatures. The initially strange alphabetical sequence of the commentaries works to the book's advantage; I leaped myopically to my own research subjects (tyrannosaurs! lots of them!) to be drawn into surrounding topics.

Finding the book's missteps is a sweaty and unsatisfying pedantic exercise. Herbivorous dinosaurs' vast guts would act automatically as efficient batch reactors, probably enabling them to consume the aforementioned dawn redwood that Acorn dismisses as a dietary source. Sometimes the conversational style deludes us into thinking Acorn is missing a point, such as in a discussion of the extinct American "cheetah," only to embarrass the specialist with absolutely contemporary data (the pronghorn-chasing "cheetah" is now established as relative of pumas). Acorn describes how a pair of star-crossed turtles died together under a rain of volcanic ash to be later stepped on by a dinosaur, but somehow misses the Shakespearian implications.

So is Acorn a particularly bright naturalist? Alberta paleontologists at least owe him an oblique intellectual debt, with his discovery of a specimen *Troodon*, regarded as among the brainiest dinosaurs. With *Deep Alberta*, we owe him more for communicating to the laity a broad, engaging, yet subtly sophisticated introduction to our field. **Eric Snively**, *Department of Biological Sciences, University of Alberta*.