FOREWORD

The joy of living in a house in a Costa Rican dry forest conservation area is that anything might happen, anytime. The actors are mammals, reptiles, frogs, and insects that make use of the open house and hunt or shelter inside. Spectacular though they are, the birds stay out—except for their sounds—and the stage is left to other vertebrates. Much of the action happens toward dark or in the night. As the afternoon dims and the dusk cicadas sing, the Sac-Wing *Saccopteryx* bats leave the back wall and fly sweeping patrols back and forth, imperceptibly feeding on insects. The long-tongued, nectar-feeding *Glossophaga* bats stay indoors much later, but they are the aerial stars. During courtship, they fly around the rooms like breakneck stunt pilots, through all available three-dimensional space, up over walls and swooping down under the desk, across my lap and around again. In the still of the night the footfalls of the Virginia Opossum or the soft *Caluromys* quietly cross the metal roof. A *Liomys* mouse, the ancestor of the kangaroo rats in the desert of the United States, loads its cheek pouches to near bursting from a bag of rice, ferries it to store temporarily in a shoe or all the way into its burrow, and returns almost insatiably for more.

In the daylight, the large *Trachycephalus* (*Phrynohyas*) tree frogs hide in pots or back into drains with rubbery contortions. The Sac-wing Bats have returned and are stretching and nursing and arguing and

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chattering audibly into the morning. Just outside, a vine moves strangely, rising, and comes into focus as one of the vine snakes, an *Oxybelis* or the big-headed *Imantodes* or the bright parrot snake *Leptophis mexicanus*. Don't leave to get a camera—look away and it will become invisible again. Lizards appear, from the small red-headed *Gonatodes* and taut metallic skink *Mabuya* on the shady walls to the large iguanalike ctenosaur males in the sunlit road and tree canopies.

These house experiences are close-up glimpses of what is happening over the grand sweep of the large conservation area—little windows into the richness and diversity of very different species going about their lives. Carrol and Ethelle Henderson have spent much of their adult lives bringing people to the natural world, or in Carrol's many books, the natural world to people. Here Carrol's dramatic new photographs and expanded text take you into that world again.

The tragic back story, though, is that wild Costa Rica is changing, as is all else in the natural world, severely affected directly and indirectly by human activity. Some of the generalist or human-commensal vertebrates have become common and widespread, but many of the specialist species are shrinking or on the way to local extinction, even in protected

areas such as the conservation areas. Very many are becoming genetically stunted as the landscape changes and their habitats shrink and change from once large land-masses to archipelagos of little fragments, winking out one by one.

The Golden Toad is gone, and the great Pacific Leatherback that shakes the beach with its heaves is severely threatened. Behind these, a host of lesser-known species are shrinking or going extinct outside of human notice. Their absence ripples through the natural world, but humans are not aware. May this book help to take us toward an awakening.

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