Foreword

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The 1,500-mile boundary separating Mexico and the United States is unique. This border sees more change, more contrast between neighbors, than any other of its length. Language, religion, ethnicity, government and legal systems, and biota—all differ to varying degrees, and these differences lead some *norteamericanos* to be surprised by the warm hospitality that they receive from the people in rural Mexico.

Not everyone cares for surprises. I have known sophisticated, highly trained, and widely traveled biologists, with a deep interest in the rich ecology of the Mexican Plateau, to be so phobic that they simply would not be pried loose from the United States to explore Mexico, unless it was within the confines of a resort like Cancún. This was before the current period of violence along the border stemming from the drug wars, which has, of course, only increased the apprehensions of the apprehensive.

In contrast, Fred and Marie Webster are venturesome. In this book we learn that in about 250 miles—half a day's drive south of Brownsville, Texas, and not far south of the Tropic of Cancer—one arrives within a few miles of a lush temperate broadleaf forest, the cloud forest surrounding Rancho del Cielo. Those last few miles, from the pavement to the field station, are an adventure all their own.

On the jolting “road” to El Cielo, the Websters introduce us to Brownsville businessman John Hunter, who loved to put four-wheel-drive vehicles to the test. Following a serendipitous breakdown on a foggy night in the mountains, with only fireflies for illumination, daylight revealed to him a forest that rivaled the green mansions that we read about in William H. Hudson's famous novel of that title.

Rancho del Cielo is located in the middle of a fascinating montane vegetation gradient straddling the Sierra de Guatemala, an offset of the Sierra Madre Oriental. On the east side, tropical lowland forests, those not cleared for tomatoes or sugarcane, support palms, strangler figs, and dozens of other species of tropical trees. On the west side of the sierra is thorn scrub of the Chihuahuan Desert, with creosote bush, cholla, prickly pear cactus, and arborescent yucca. In the mountains between the tropical lowlands and the desert are moist forests of sweetgum, podocarpus, magnolia, redbud, and many species of oak. Numerous epiphytes drape the tree branches, and

numerous animals, including lungless salamanders, live in the epiphytes. Here, just south of the Tropic of Cancer and growing within forty miles of each other, are six climatically and biotically distinct plant formations, diversity to match what one finds in the entire state of Texas. Nestled between the lowlands and the desert, the cloud forest of El Cielo is a cathedral with sacred music provided by solitaires and singing quail, a gift of the gods for birders, botanists, and those choking on city life.

This book tells of the Websters' many adventures at Rancho del Cielo. For example, Marie, along with an ornithological companion, ran a breeding-bird census fifteen years after the first in 1949–1950 by Byron E. Harrell. We learn how Frank Harrison, the Canadian who had lived alone in the cloud forest since 1935, eventually assumed the unofficial role of a field station manager, until his tragic murder. Frank's knowledge, aid, and enthusiasm proved crucial to the completion of numerous biological research projects, theses, and dissertations, my own included.

We learn how John Hunter patiently brokered a land transfer of Frank Harrison's property at Rancho del Cielo to the Gorgas Science Foundation, then at a small Texas junior college, to the lasting benefit of its students. Given the convolutions of both Texan and Mexican laws and politics, it was an amazing achievement. Additional land on tropical slopes too rough to cultivate was added with the financial aid of George M. Sutton, who pioneered ornithological research in the region. The Sutton reserve attracts cracid game birds, brocket deer, and jaguar.

I have barely scratched the surface here. In 1985 the Mexican government designated the Gómez Farías region as a biosphere reserve. Subsequent research by Mexican ecologists and their students has yielded a rich corpus of new information on the biota of the region and its management (to appear in a book in Spanish being edited by Gerardo Ramos Sánchez of the Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas, with contributions from dozens of authors on the natural history of the El Cielo Biosphere Reserve). No regional biosphere reserve could exist without friends and supporters in the republic of Mexico; here those people include Enrique Beltrán and Efraim Hernández X., both active in preservation efforts beginning in the 1950s, followed by G. Halfstetter and the French ecologist Henri Puig, who has written a book on El Cielo's remarkable forest.

As Fred and Marie Webster reveal, the exploitation of forest resources, especially lumbering, accompanied by hurricanes, drought, and wildfire,

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has taken its toll. Yet we do not know what happened to the Tamaulipan cloud forest a thousand years ago when sizable parts of lowland rain forest throughout the New World tropics yielded to heavy use by prehistoric agriculturalists. Archaeological remains abound around Rancho del Cielo. Perhaps ecologists underestimate the capacity of the tropical forests to rebound from severe disturbance, as the temperate forests in the eastern United States have. With the interest of Mexican ecologists and the Universidad de Tamaulipas, one hopes for some solutions to that daunting conundrum, unresolved during the twentieth century: how to balance the needs of humans with those of nature. The Websters' fascinating story takes us up the pounding road to heaven's ranch, Rancho del Cielo.

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