

# A Conversation with Mary Holland



Author of  
*Animal Eyes*, *A Beaver's Busy Year*  
and *Ferdinand Fox's First Summer*

*You are a naturalist, writer and photographer, what first sparked your interest in writing and photographing the natural world around you?*

I grew up in a very rural setting, with no close neighbors and lots of woods and fields to explore. I also had very tolerant parents, who didn't object to my tendency to collect "treasures" that I found, including animal skulls, scat, bones, etc. Much to my delight when I grew up, I found that it was possible to earn a living spending time outdoors and teaching about the natural world, and thus became a naturalist/environmental educator. After spending most of my life observing and teaching about the natural world, I knew when and where to seek out subjects when my interest in photography grew. It proved much easier to "collect" on film than in my house! I realized that if I shared my interest in natural history through writing, I could reach even more people. Combining my photography with writing helped to bring what I was writing about alive. It is very rewarding to share my enthusiasm as well as increase others' awareness of the natural world

in this way.

*Where does your creative process start when writing a book?*

There have been certain subjects that have always interested me, such as the natural events that occur on an annual basis (spring migration of birds, woodland wildflowers appearing, frogs, salamanders, snakes and turtles awakening from hibernation, etc.). It is easiest for me to write about the things that I feel passionate about, and my book *Naturally Curious* is the result of this particular interest, as is my daily natural history blog, [www.naturallycuriouswithmaryholland.wordpress.com](http://www.naturallycuriouswithmaryholland.wordpress.com).

There are also times when I have a rare opportunity to witness and photographically record natural history. If I've managed to capture a fairly complete story with my camera, I consider its potential as a book. *Milkweed Visitors* and *Ferdinand Fox's First Summer* are examples of this good fortune.



### *What first sparked your interest in beavers?*

I grew up near a lake where beavers had built a bank lodge, and I was visiting the pond with my Labrador retriever, Thornton, one early spring day. We climbed to the top of the lodge, and I put my ear to the vent where I heard the high-pitched sound of newborn beavers. Detecting movement on its roof, an adult beaver inside the lodge plunged into the water and surfaced several feet out in the lake, whereupon Thornton leapt into the icy water in hot pursuit. The beaver soon disappeared, and a second beaver appeared, even further out in the lake, which, of course, was even more tantalizing to my dog. He completely ignored my calling for him to come back. For half an hour the two beavers took turns luring Thornton further and further out into the lake. I finally had to plunge into the icy water myself, and haul him back to shore. I later read that this is a technique that beavers resort to when they feel their young are threatened – they will intentionally lure a predator so far out in the water that it can't make it back to land. This experience cemented my interest in beavers. Their adaptations and behavior continue to be a source of fascination for me.



of a beaver lodge looked like that I managed to squeeze myself into the lodge while on my back – it was a tight fit! I remember how perfectly symmetrical the inside of the roof was. It was as though the beavers used tools to measure every bite with.

### *How was writing *A Beaver's Busy Year* different than *Ferdinand Fox's First Summer*?*

While I love red foxes, I've admired and studied beavers all of my life. Writing *A Beaver's Busy Year* was an opportunity to share some of what

I have learned about their behavior and their adaptations. As the only animal other than humans capable of dramatically changing the landscape, beavers are endlessly fascinating to me, and the writing came very easily. Their behavior wasn't as easy to observe as fox kit behavior, as they were often sleeping when I visited their ponds, but beavers leave many more signs than foxes!



*Speaking of Ferdinand, The photos show so much "personality"*

*how do you get the perfect photograph of a wild animal when their instinct is to run and hide from humans?*

### *Through your research, what experience taught you the most about beavers?*

That would have to be the day I discovered an abandoned beaver lodge, where the dam had broken and there was no water in the pond. This meant that the entrances to the lodge, which previously were under water, were now exposed. I wanted so badly to see what the inside

So much of photography is luck – finding the subject, having the access to it that is necessary in order to photograph it, having weather that allows photographs to be taken, and behavior by your subject that is not altered by your presence. When these factors are all met, magic happens. Patience, good equipment, and a familiarity with the behavior of the animal you're photographing

–all of these contribute to successfully capturing a wild animal with your camera. I spend a great deal of time outdoors, and anyone who does is bound to come across wildlife once in a while! Capturing its natural behavior is the trick -- many a hot summer day I've spent under a camouflage blanket, and I have submerged more than one camera and lens trying to get the perfect beaver or common loon shot! One thing most people don't know is that my dog Emma accompanies me on all of my forays, and only because she is so calm and so patient can I get the images of wild animals that I do. Of course, I probably miss as many opportunities as I get, due to her presence, but she also finds some of my subjects for me!



*What did you learn from writing and photographing Ferdinand and the family of foxes? What do you hope that young readers take away from this book?*

My first observation was the striking similarity between the behavior of red foxes and domestic dogs. Because they are both in the dog family, foxes and dogs tend to behave in a similar fashion, but I was struck by the degree of similarity of their antics. I learned many things during the hours and days that I spent photographing this fox family...the patience of the mother and the amazing care she gave her kits. She spent HOURS combing burrs out of her kits' fur, for instance, and tolerated three or four kits nursing frantically at the same time...

the diversity of food that the parents brought back to the den (parts of snakes, rodents, moles, deer, coyote, domestic turkey, etc.)...the games that kits play mimicking those that humans also engage in, from hide-and-seek to tag and king-of-the-mountain...the soft "chuckle" that a parent makes upon returning with prey for the kits...

The list goes on and on. It amazes me how much one can learn just from sitting quietly and observing an animal's natural behavior, whether it's an ant or a large predator

My hope is that young readers will feel a kinship with wild animals after reading about this red fox family. If a connection is made between a human, young or

old, and the natural world, my belief is that the human will care for and protect the natural world and all that live in it far more than they would have had this connection not been made. It is this connection that I hope *Ferdinand Fox's First Summer* facilitates for its readers.

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