

BOOKS | BOOKSHELF

# 'The Weather Detective' Review: Answers in the Wind

Following the success of Peter Wohlleben's "The Hidden Life of Trees," the author's earlier book gets an English translation.

*By Geoff Wisner*

July 27, 2018 4:11 pm ET

Peter Wohlleben, a professional forester, manages an ancient beech forest for the German municipality of Hümmel, near the Belgian border. He believes that not only do trees compete with one another for light and nutrients, they support one another when a tree is sick or injured, and they communicate threats to one another by sending electrical impulses or by releasing chemicals into the air. His unusual insights made "The Hidden Life of Trees" (2015) an international best seller.

Now his earlier book "The Weather Detective" has been published in an English translation by Ruth Ahmedzai Kemp. While "The Hidden Life of Trees" focused squarely on its subject, "The Weather Detective" ranges more widely in fewer pages. Many of its tips and observations are aimed at gardeners, though the author's more general aim is to encourage people to spend more time outdoors and to notice and understand more of the phenomena that surround them.

Some of the author's notes on understanding weather are fairly basic: "To determine the wind direction, you can't beat the classic weathercock." Others are more surprising: The daisy closes its petals, or even droops over, if rain is on the way, and the flowers of the water lily "close when they sense rain, often hours before it comes." Whether the flower senses a change in air pressure or responds to the dimming of sunlight because of cloud cover remains unclear.

A small insect called a thrips, whose fringed wings work like paddles, swarms when a storm is on the way. Why? The resistance of air for thrips is like the resistance of water for humans, so "their motion is more like swimming through

the air, and it's therefore a rather slow action." When the air is hot, sticky and moving, they can get around more easily.



PHOTO: GAMMA-RAPHO VIA GETTY IMAGES

Other observations are intriguing but have less to do with the weather. The common swift, we learn, "sometimes flies for several months without interruption, even sleeping in flight, albeit for a mere few seconds at a time." The moon's gravity not only causes the tides but pulls on the Earth to a surprising extent. "Over the course of the day, your garden can bob anywhere between 24 and 32 inches up and down without you noticing it." Many scientists believe that the water that covers almost three-quarters of our planet's surface came mainly from comets, "which traveled through the universe like dirty snowballs and, veering off course, crashed into the Earth." (Other scientists say asteroids were the source.)

---

## THE WEATHER DETECTIVE

---

By Peter Wohlleben  
*Dutton, 195 pages, \$20*

---

At many points in this brief book it becomes clear that the author is a European writing for other Europeans. Whether you find this annoying or interesting may depend on whether your main interest is growing flowers or enjoying unfamiliar perspectives on the natural world.

For instance, Mr. Wohlleben quotes the saying "red sky in the morning: shepherd's warning," which we may remember as "sailors take warning." The spells of warm weather in the fall that we call Indian summer are known in German as "old woman's summer," after the silvery threads left by spiders in the air. He mentions "the extremely unpopular European water vole" but doesn't pause to say what makes them so unpopular. (In addition to looking like rats—

NEWSLETTER SIGN-UP

## Books

Be the first to find out what's new and what's good. Get the weekend book reviews before the weekend.

PREVIEW

SUBSCRIBE

Ratty in “The Wind in the Willows” was a water vole—they sometimes feed on crops.) A couple of pages are devoted to ways you can keep martens, a forest-dwelling member of the weasel family, from nesting in your car or chewing through the rubber tubing: a serious issue in Germany, where drivers can buy marten insurance, but less so in the U.S., where spotting a marten is an unusual event.

“The Weather Detective” is peppered with fun facts about nature but breaks little new ground. Readers in search of the wide-ranging insights they found in Mr. Wohlleben’s book on trees may find that this one whets their appetite but does not satisfy it.

—*Mr. Wisner’s latest book is “Thoreau’s Animals.”*