



Life in the Soil: A Guide for Naturalists and Gardeners

James B. Nardi

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Leonardo da Vinci once mused that “we know more about the movement of celestial bodies than about the soil underfoot,” an observation that is as apt today as it was five hundred years ago. The biological world under our toes is often unexplored and unappreciated, yet it teems with life. In one square meter of earth, there lives trillions of bacteria, millions of nematodes, hundreds of thousands of mites, thousands of insects and worms, and hundreds of snails and slugs. But because of their location and size, many of these creatures are as unfamiliar and bizarre to us as anything found at the bottom of the ocean.

Lavishly illustrated with nearly three hundred color illustrations and masterfully-rendered black and white drawings throughout, *Life in the Soil* invites naturalists and gardeners alike to dig in and discover the diverse community of creatures living in the dirt below us. Biologist and acclaimed natural history artist James B. Nardi begins with an introduction to soil ecosystems, revealing the unseen labors of underground organisms maintaining the rich fertility of the earth as they recycle nutrients between the living and mineral worlds. He then introduces readers to a dazzling array of creatures: wolf spiders with glowing red eyes, snails with 120 rows of teeth, and 10,000-year-old fungi, among others. Organized by taxon, *Life in the Soil* covers everything from slime molds and roundworms to woodlice and dung beetles, as well as vertebrates from salamanders to shrews. The book ultimately explores the crucial role of soil ecosystems in conserving the worlds above and below ground.

A unique and illustrative introduction to the many unheralded creatures that inhabit our soils and shape our environment aboveground, *Life in the Soil* will inform and enrich the naturalist in all of us.

Life in the Soil: A Guide for Naturalists and Gardeners Details

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From Reader Review Life in the Soil: A Guide for Naturalists and Gardeners for online ebook

Anna says

Life in the Soil is an excellent book if you're interested in how soil forms and how living things in the soil (especially invertebrates) influence that soil. The illustrations are beautiful, and it's a handy field guide to the major types of animals you'll find in the soil as well.

Read my summary of the best bits [here](#).

Christian says

Wow.. what a book.. what a topic.. it brings me back to my university Soils classes.. and adds a layer of wonderment about the "good earth".

Jamie says

This really is a very beautiful book. Nardi has produced very nice pencil illustrations of each of the major groups of animals that he covers. He also has put in some nice color illustrations and photos in the center of the book. It took me quite a long time to get through the entire book mostly because I spent a lot of time examining each illustration. They really are remarkable illustrations.

Nardi begins by giving an overview of how soil is formed, the various cycles of nutrients important to the soil, and the partnerships between soil inhabitants.

The central part of the book, and it's bulk is a field guide to the inhabitants of the soil. This guide won't help you identify many creatures to the species level, but it will help to slot almost all soil inhabitants into an appropriate taxon, whether that taxon be at the phylum level (or even kingdom level) all the way down to species for some creatures. More importantly, Nardi describes how each creature fits into the soil community.

After a brief section on promoting healthy soils, Nardi gives some tips on how to observe and collect soil inhabitants. I'm looking forward to trying some of his suggestions...just as soon as I find the time.

Highly recommended for anyone interested in what lives in the soil. Of course you may get some weird looks from people who don't share an interest in the creepy-crawlies that live in the dirt.

Michael Blackmore says

Liked it the sense of learning it imparted in covered an oft ignored topic. It certainly enhanced my sense of how abundant life truly is within the soil unseen.

I will admit reading it straight through got a bit repetitive since it is really guide and it cover so many species. Just the number of beetles alone is kind of daunting....

Still a good reference to have about and something to expand your thinking a bit.

Jelehla Ziembra says

Fantastically informative!

Lindsay says

This book is so infinitely readable.

Bonnie Lee says

Easy read. In fact the prose seemed aimed at young readers, not adult readers. That said, Nardi stays on topic and does provide useful information for those with green thumbs or seeking to acquire one.

Katie says

Meanigful reading given the rate at which the world is losing its topsoil. Soil capable of supporting plant life requires a complex array of biological and chemical processes made possible by the organisms that cohabit between the lifeless specks of pulverized rock and transform it into the medium we know as soil. When we've killed off these organisms, the remaining particles wash away, blow away, and leave formerly fertile ground barren. Erosion of topsoil is taking place faster than the earth can create soil. Once it's gone, we cannot grow food. Sounds drastic? It is.

Nancy F says

Soil ecology glorified. Great illustrations make the critters cuter.

Benjamin says

This is more of a field guide than a sit-down-and-read book. I bought it a while ago and love it. It already taught me why I keep seeing little crayfish on the paved paths of Golden Gate Park.

Ashley Millet says

A very helpful and beautiful natural history book.

Eric Polley says

Interesting read so far. Not overly technical, yet enough to chew on. Mr. Nardi writes with almost a prose voice about the natural world in a way that evokes place enjoyably.

Randy says

The soil formation section at the beginning is my favorite part of the book.

Adam says

I've been knee-deep in soil-science and ag-histories these past few months. The more I learn of soil's role in humans' ecological history, the more I realize that it is the missing culprit in both examinations of history and analyses of modern environmental challenges. And, from the opposite direction, the more I learn about soil ecology and the role soils play in the biosphere, the more I WANT to learn about it. Hence, this book.

The soil, or biomantle as Nardi sometimes calls it, mediates the business of life on "dry land." Its organisms are responsible for turning the dry regolith formed by wind, water, frost, and other erosions into the nutrient buffet that sustains complex ecosystems. Much more goes into maintaining soil health than one might think, and the manifold ways an organism can contribute to it (while going about some very interesting business of its own) are the subject and inspiration for this book. There seems to be an unspoken but unbroken rule that a species must beget healthy soil - or it won't last long, and the soil will come back through the toil of wiser organisms. Humans, it seems, are habitual offenders against this rule, and, if we are unable to stop ourselves in time, will drive ourselves extinct because of it.

James Nardi's *Life in the Soil* attempts to bring into the public consciousness the rich stories and ecological centrality of soil. It begins with a very nice overview of soil basics (formation, composition, and factors in the above), slightly more in depth than the intros I'd found lacking in books more focused on agroecology (*Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations*; *Out of the Earth: Civilization and the Life of the Soil*). The meat of the book, though, is a broad-brush survey of the major diverse groups that make up soil communities: bacteria, algae, and fungi are lumped into short but fascinating descriptions, and subsequently smaller taxa of larger organisms are examined.

I found that reading this book straight through was a mistake. Half-way through the insects (one of my favorites) I found myself hating the book. I was initially, however, completely enchanted with the book. I had never found a really good explanation of much of the basics of soil ecology, and I'd been hoping for one for quite a long time. After a while, however, and after getting through the really relevant and interesting parts (the intro, and fungi and bacteria) I became dissatisfied with the density of really interesting stuff. It became, fundamentally, too simplistic to be worth reading and too repetitive to be able to appreciate the

fascinating life cycles of even the most bizarre insects. Anesthesia of familiarity, perhaps bred by the repetitious format of the entries.

In the end, though, I think it's certainly worth reading as an introduction to this incredible topic. I'd like to find a the same book, but one or two orders of magnitude larger, with more detail and many more illustrations for each group. The final chapter does have great redeeming value, however: it has instructions and diagrams regarding ways to filter soil samples and examine life in the soil firsthand. I plan to use these techniques soon, or at least once the ground's thawed, particularly on the compost in the garden.

Troy says

This is a thorough, informative book that provides good detail on a wide variety of organisms which call the soil their home. You will most likely come away from this book having learned some interesting facts about creatures. The book itself is divided endlessly into headings upon subheadings, so it reads more like a textbook than a novel. While interesting at times, there are portions of this book that will likely be of little to no interest to you.
