

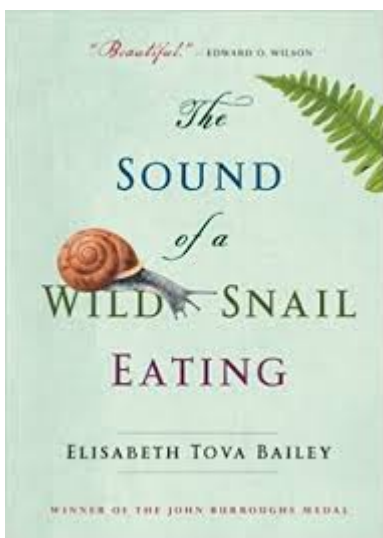
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## Book Review: The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating – Evergreen Audubon

4-5 minutes

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The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating  
by Elisabeth Tova Bailey.



The unusual title, *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*, caught my eye, in addition to a note on the book cover that revealed that Elisabeth Bailey was awarded the John Burroughs Medal for her small book, an auspicious mention. Bill and I were visiting the Botanical Gardens at the University of Wisconsin when I found this delightful account at the bookstore. I hadn't considered writing a book review about snails, but couldn't resist.

Bailey begins with a quote from Florence Nightingale, who said in her 1912 *Notes on Nursing* that "a small pet is often an excellent

companion.” The author found herself with a life-threatening illness, contracted on a visit to the Alps, that leaves her completely immobilized, unable even to sit up. A concerned friend, on a walk through the woods, finds a small snail. She brings it to Bailey in a pot of field violets, as a possible distraction and companion. “You might enjoy it,” says her friend. In a panic, Bailey says she has no idea what to do to keep a snail.

With great surprise on the first evening, Bailey watches the snail as it glides down the flowerpot and explore the dish underneath. She offers the snail flower blossoms to eat, amazed at being able to hear its munching, hence the title of her book. Eventually Bailey moves the snail to a terrarium and offers it mushrooms to eat and water to drink in a mussel shell. The snail sleeps during the day and eats and explores at night. Its nocturnal existence provides comfort and encouragement to Bailey, who is no longer able to enjoy the day herself. The snail’s company reminds her that she is not alone in savoring the dark.

You will find much to learn in Bailey’s account of her life with a snail. With each small chapter, she offers quotes from poetry, diaries, and other literature that include thoughts and anecdotes about snails. The 17th-century English poet, John Donne, notes that a snail is always at home, carrying its house about with it. Japanese poet Kobayashi Issa, asks in haiku about a snail:

little snail  
facing this way  
where to now?

Bailey even discovers that, in 1839 Edgar Allan Poe wrote a book about snails and other shelled creatures in *The Conchologists’*

## First Book.

Interested in learning more about snails, Bailey gathers about her a huge collection of scientific work about gastropods. Thus, her account is as much about the biology of snails as it is about her relationship to the snail that becomes her only companion. She recounts the genealogy of snails, informs us about the nature of the snail's slime, and lets us in on its reproductive life. She even discovers that snails can overeat and suffer from severe indigestion.

When her snail lays a “cluster of eight tiny eggs,” Bailey discovers that snails are hermaphrodites, although they can also have romantic encounters. Soon the terrarium is filled with tiny snail hatchlings.

When Bailey is finally able to move back home, she takes one of the offspring with her and has the original snail and all the rest of its young released back into the forest exactly where it was originally found. Later in the next year, once again able to walk short distances, Bailey releases the young offspring into a new wild world.

The famed biologist, Edward O. Wilson, calls Bailey's story, “Beautiful.” It is a small, quiet masterpiece,” according to *The Washington Times*. Bailey dedicates the book to *Biopilia*, Wilson's personal account of his response to nature. In it, Wilson tell us that “the natural world is the refuge of the spirit ... richer even than human imagination.”

I hope you will also find this beautiful little book as entertaining and extraordinary as I did and enjoy learning much about a snail.

[Trailer to the Book](#)

[Hear Elizabeth Bailey's Voice](#)

[Elizabeth's Website](#)

Winner of the John Burroughs Medal

Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill 2010