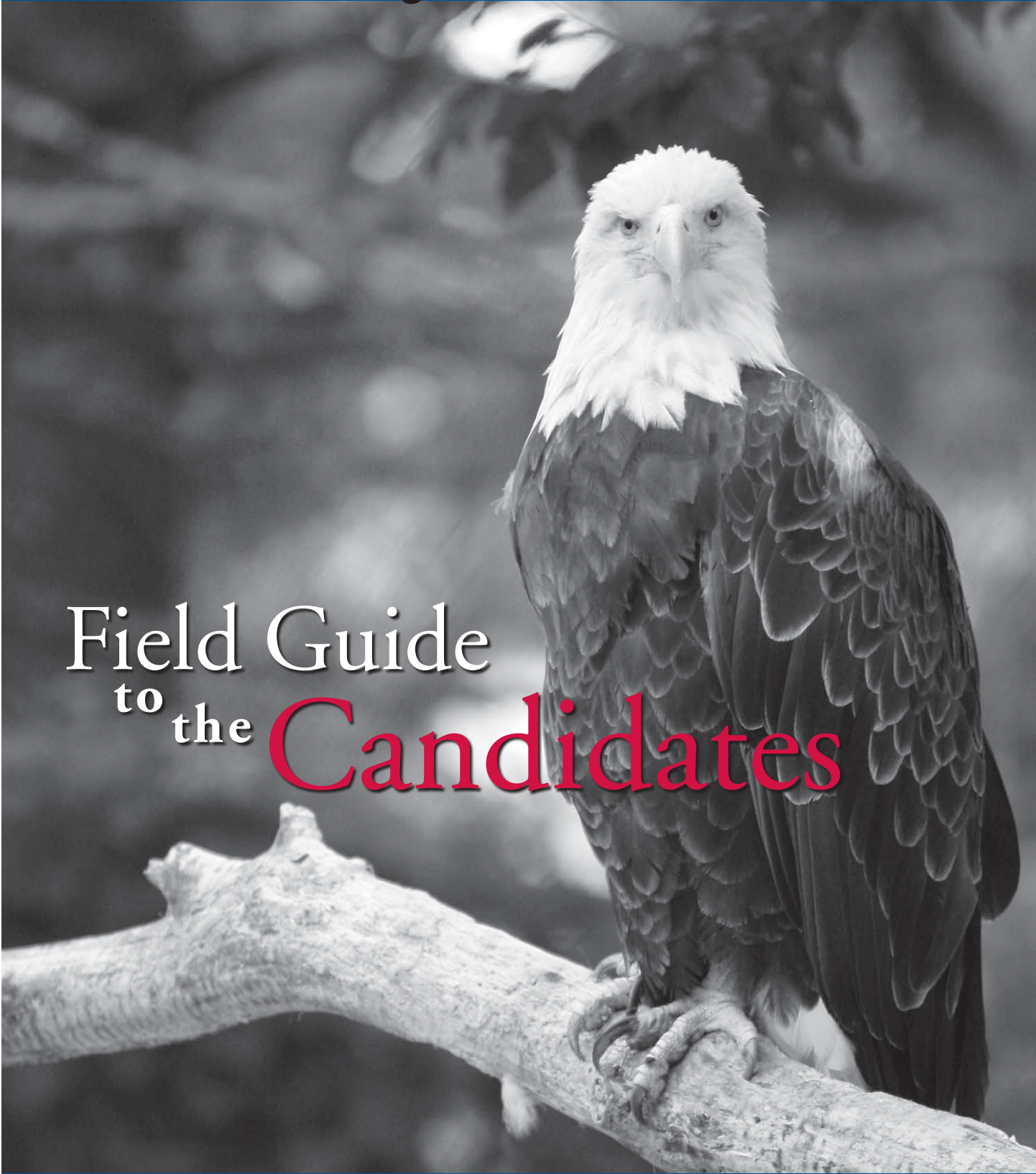


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Field Guide to the Candidates

PATRICK JOHNSON

Explore, enjoy and protect the planet.

Ben Cramer's Forest of Books

A LOOK AT NEW BOOKS ON CONSERVATION, OUTDOOR ADVENTURE, AND ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS.



HEY MR. GREEN: SIERRA MAGAZINE'S ANSWER GUY TACKLES YOUR TOUGHEST GREEN LIVING QUESTIONS

Bob Schildgen
Sierra Club Books, 2008

Like Bob Schildgen's popular "Hey Mr. Green," column, which regularly appears in Sierra magazine, this book consists of a collection of pithy answers to readers' questions, such as, should I dry clean my clothes? A sort of Dear Abby for environmentalists, Schildgen dishes up his answers with a dose of Abby-style tart wit and a breezy writing style that makes for an entertaining read. While he doesn't pretend to have all the answers to complex environmental debates, readers will be stimulated not only by his answers, but also by the questions themselves, which are often surprisingly insightful.

Schildgen is adept at skewering the flawed reasoning, obstructionism, and anti-intellectualism lurking behind the arguments of many anti-environmentalists. But occasionally he lapses into cranky harangues when a more reasoned discussion of environmental philosophy and ethics is called for.

That's a small caveat in an otherwise delightful and surprisingly practical book. What makes this book, and his column, unique are the straightforward answers Schildgen comes up with when confronted with the conundrums of green living. Is it better, for example, to drink beer out of cans or bottles? Farmer's markets are great—but what is the true environmental cost of farmer's market fare vs. store-bought foods? What about washing your clothes in Tide or the other major brands that now proudly tout their phosphate-free state? Schildgen's answers are well-researched and verifiable; nearly a fourth of the book is dedicated to endnotes.

Schildgen also does a great job of explaining seemingly contradictory theories, and finding the happy medium between them. He makes it clear, with example after concrete example, that we can do our part for the planet, even as the scientific, political, economic, and ethical debate over how to save it rages around us.

Grade: A-

Schildgen is adept at skewering the flawed reasoning, obstructionism, and anti-intellectualism lurking behind the arguments of many anti-environmentalists.

NAKED IDEALISM

Dave Whitner
Whitner Authentic Living, 2008

This book offers readers a stimulating and novel blend of self-help manual and sustainable living guide. One of its most appealing aspects is that its author practices what he preaches. Because of his background as a strategic life counselor and his own determination to lead a sustainable lifestyle, Dave Whitner is able to draw upon a wealth of personal experience, as well as those of his clients, in making his case. As a result, he is able to offer exceptional advice on the peculiar crossover aspects of the personal and the socially responsible life. He addresses a range of topics that will be all-too familiar to committed activists: how to recognize and deal with compassion fatigue, self-righteousness, and the related temptation to develop an unyielding and sometimes off-putting stance of political correctness.

After decades of self-help books it would be difficult for anyone to write one without treading familiar ground, and Whitner doesn't entirely avoid this trap. Much of the middle section of the book recycles self-help trends, bromides, and buzzwords, and for that reason this is the weakest section of the book. Whitner could have also used a good editor to avoid some stylistic excesses, such as the annoying overuse exclamation points.

But while the middle section of the book falls into self-help clichés, Whitner's pairing of personal growth with environmental activism is quite original. The beginning and concluding portions are strong, as this is where Whitner focuses on the fundamental goal of his philosophy—a sustainable lifestyle that will help one's community and the planet, while also providing personal fulfillment for the activist. Whitner posits a dynamic and contemporary take on idealism. For him, environmental change is not a grim necessity that can only be accomplished through denial and asceticism, but rather a joyous embrace of both our inner and outer worlds.

Grade: B

Ben Cramer is Outings Chair for Moshannon Group and the Pennsylvania Chapter.