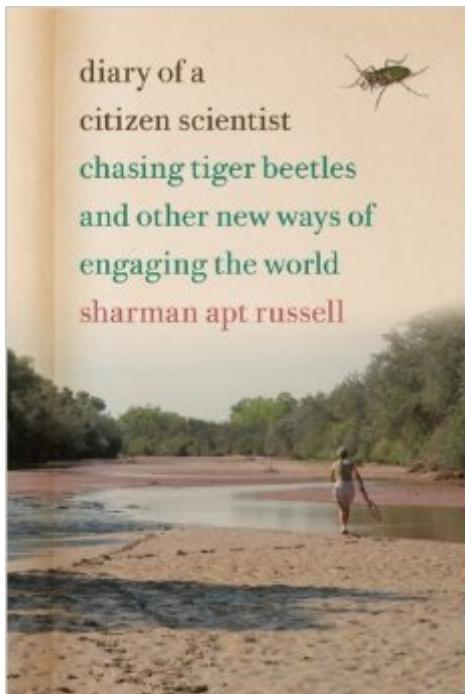


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# Diary Of A Citizen Scientist: Chasing Tiger Beetles And Other New Ways Of Engaging The World



## Synopsis

Winner of the 2016 John Burroughs Medal, the 2015 WILLA Award for Best Creative Nonfiction, and finalist for the 2015 New Mexico/Arizona Book Awards In the exploding world of citizen science, hundreds of thousands of volunteers are monitoring climate change, tracking bird migrations, finding stardust for NASA, and excavating mastodons. The sheer number of citizen scientists, combined with new technology, has begun to shape how research gets done. Non-professionals become acknowledged experts: dentists turn into astronomers and accountants into botanists. *A Diary of a Citizen Scientist* is a timely exploration of the phenomenon of citizen science, told through the lens of nature writer Sharman Apt Russell's yearlong study of a little-known species, the Western red-bellied tiger beetle. In a voice both humorous and lyrical, Russell recounts her persistent and joyful tracking of an insect she calls "charismatic," "elegant," and "fierce." Patrolling the Gila River in southwestern New Mexico, collector's net in hand, she negotiates the realities of climate change even as she celebrates the beauty of a still-wild and rural landscape. Russell's self-awareness--of her occasionally-misplaced confidence, her quest to fill in "that blank spot on the map of tiger beetles," and her desire to become newly engaged in her life--creates a portrait not only of the tiger beetle she tracks, but of the mindset behind self-driven scientific inquiry. Falling in love with the diversity of citizen science, she participates in crowdsourcing programs that range from cataloguing galaxies to monitoring the phenology of native plants, applauds the growing role of citizen science in environmental activism, and marvels at the profusion of projects around the world. *A Diary of a Citizen Scientist* offers its readers a glimpse into the transformative properties of citizen science--and documents the transformation of the field as a whole.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

As a professional biologist and a lover of nature writing, I enjoyed reading this book about the author's experience studying tiger beetles as a citizen scientist. Many of the experiences that Sharman Apt Russell shared are representative of what all new scientists go through, like the daunting task of dissection, disappointment when experiments and observations don't go as planned, and the importance or recognizing that finding evidence against your hypothesis can be just as rewarding as finding evidence to support it. The major continuous thread throughout the book is the study of tiger beetles, but there were also many asides about nature walks and participation in all types of citizen science projects. I particularly enjoyed some of the descriptions of the landscape of the southwest. There were a few things I wish could have been different. For one thing, I think that the heaviness of scientific research can be alleviated by a bit of laughter, and there was sadly no humor in this book at all. Secondly, I was frustrated by how often the author talked about herself or someone else being the very first person to see or discover some aspect of beetle biology. This is an attitude shared by many scientists 50-100 years ago, but today most biologists will tell you that when it comes to natural history, the odds of that being the case is very, very small. Just because there isn't a documented report in Western scientific literature doesn't mean that no one who has lived in that area over the past few thousand years (or more) has every noticed or seen the phenomenon of interest.

The title of Sharman Apt Russell's book, *Diary of a Citizen Scientist: Chasing Tiger Beetles and Other Ways of Engaging the World*, says it all. Ms. Russell, by example, shows and/or reminds the reader that s/he can stay connected to nature, to the earth, to all that is around us that is not manmade, and still live a life that includes a significant other, children, a job, getting to the big box retail for the yearly sale "all that is being part of the 21st Century in the western world. A person can find a science project that is right sized for them and get into that game; each of us can make a contribution whether we live in Southwestern, New Mexico or the middle of Los Angeles, California. Russell's book is a how-to. She takes us on her journey "part detective novel (where is that Rio Grande tiger beetle?) and part personal narrative (her diary) that spans almost 18 months (July 2011-Nov. 2012). And the milestones are as exciting as the day to day-ness of the book is instructive: Will the larvae in the terrarium make it? Will Ms. Russell really be able to cut into the

ovaries of a tiny tiger beetle? This intermixed with visits to her daughter's third grade classroom which is in another small New Mexico town, or a reflection such as this: "What I really think: I should be on my knees. The sky is a religious landscape, not a scientific one. I think about my father." • makes for expansive read. And don't worry, the guests at this party are not all beetles. To name but a few, there are coati, black bear, foxes, bobcats, grasshoppers, cranes, Javelinas and I could go on. As with all Russell's book, there are the insights that bring me up short.

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