Study Guide for THE EVOLUTION OF BEAUTY by Richard Prum, PhD

Richard Prum would like us to view Evolution by Natural Selection from a different perspective by reintroducing us to Darwin's THE DESCENT OF MAN, AND SELECTION IN RELATION TO SEX (1871). In the dozen years since the publication of ON THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES BY MEANS OF NATURAL SELECTION Darwin came to the realization that his theory failed to account for the diversity of ornament seen in the bird world (i.e., How do we explain the Peacock's tail?)

1) In "DESCENT OF MAN" Darwin proposes the concept of aesthetic evolution by mate choice as an additional mechanism to natural selection for the evolution of species. In the late 19th Century, this was a REALLY dangerous idea. Why?

2) Give a Prum example of natural selection NOT being a universally strong and deterministic force in evolution? Aesthetic evolution can lead to decadence! (see if you can find a YouTube video as a demonstration). If you have photos or videos of the species described by Prum, it would be great if you could bring your computer to share the images with the book group.

3) Wasn't the chapter on Duck Sex fascinating? Now I have to see if there are more males than female ducks in our counts. How do Bowerbirds solve the Duck Sex problem?

4) Prum states that "Beauty Happens" is the Null Hypothesis (a statement that if not falsified must be taken to be correct). As a scientist, what do you think of his reasoning?

5) I can't keep you from reading this book after Chapter 8 where the author applies his observations of the avian world to primate evolution but I found it to be quite a leap – a bridge too far, if you will. Let's discuss your reaction?

6) Why do you think this book got such great reviews in NYT, WSJ, and Smithsonian, yet receives much criticism in more scientific publications? Specifically for OPAS conservationists is there a lesson here for us to base our comments on peer-reviewed science rather than the popular media (from the PDN to Facebook – not to mention Faux News)?