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A Guide to Entice Heads Into the Clouds

By [CORNELIA DEAN](#)

Gavin Pretor-Pinney confronts his new book's major problem right up front. "You might well think," he writes, "that cloud collecting sounds like a ridiculous idea."

True, he acknowledges, clouds are ephemeral, "magicked into being" by the atmosphere and constantly changing. And, of course, they cannot actually be gathered up and stored away. But as Mr. Pretor-Pinney sees it, you don't have to possess something to collect it: "You just have to notice it and record it."

Hence "The Cloud Collector's Handbook," published by Chronicle Books, a serious yet charming field guide to clouds. The book teaches readers how to identify clouds they have seen and gives them a place to record the sightings, just the way birders create life lists of the birds they have spotted. It even has a scoring system, in which cloudspotters receive 10 points for ordinary clouds like nimbostratus, the more or less featureless rain clouds people typically have in mind when they say clouds are depressing; 40 points for a cumulonimbus storm cloud, the anvil-shaped "king of clouds"; and more points for more exotic formations.

His goal, Mr. Pretor-Pinney said in an interview, is to help readers escape the tyranny of "blue sky thinking" and to understand and appreciate the beauty of a cloudy day.

The book contains photographs of dozens of cloud types, with information on how they form and how they differ from their close relatives; a guide to rainbows and other optical effects of clouds; and a glossary of technical terms. A chart shows how meteorologists classify clouds by genus, species and variety, the way biologists classify flora and fauna.

Mr. Pretor-Pinney, founder of the [Cloud Appreciation Society](#) (motto: "Look Up and Wonder"), campaigns against the idea that sunny days are best. Still, though the society has more than 25,000 members in 87 countries and counting, encouraging cloud appreciation is uphill work.

"It's written into our language," he said. " 'A cloud hanging over you,' 'a cloud on the horizon.' "

Although small groups of members occasionally get together in Britain, the society's real life is on its Web site, where people can view reproductions of famous cloud art, read cloud-related poetry, post their own cloud photographs and post comments as long as they are cloud-related. "Otherwise," the site says, "we are not interested."

The site also sells cloud-related postcards, jewelry, T-shirts and the CD “Rain, Glorious Rain,” which is just what you think it is. As the society says, “we love clouds, we’re not ashamed to say it, and we’ve had enough of people moaning about it.”

In a way, Mr. Pretor-Pinney said, cloudspotting resembles trainspotting, the British pastime of hanging out in stations or along railway lines and noting the numbers of passing train cars and locomotives. He said he sometimes wished cloudspotters kept better trainspotter-quality track of the points they accumulate, if only because the effort would encourage them to pay more attention to what is going on overhead.

Mr. Pretor-Pinney, 42, went to Oxford, where, as he tells it, he gradually moved through physics, philosophy and psychology only to end up going to graduate school in London and getting a degree in graphic design.

In 1993, he co-founded [The Idler](#), an annual publication that celebrates the beauty of doing nothing.

“It’s unpaid work,” said Mr. Pretor-Pinney, who lives in Somerset, England, with his wife and their two daughters, ages 5 and 2. “You cannot have too many things like that.”

Mr. Pretor-Pinney is about to become a visiting fellow in meteorology at the University of Reading — which is, apparently, prepared to overlook his complete lack of training in his subject, something he sees as an advantage.

“You just need to look and observe,” he said. “Sometimes getting too trained up in something narrows your vision.”

“The Cloud Collector’s Handbook” is not the only guide to the clouds. The [World Meteorological Organization](#), an arm of the [United Nations](#), publishes an atlas of clouds, and Mr. Pretor-Pinney himself produced “The Cloudspotter’s Guide,” a surprise best-seller when it came out in Britain in 2007. (He is also the author of “The Wavewatcher’s Companion,” which appeared last year.)

But the 2007 book was text-heavy and had few color photographs, he said, and the cloud atlas is aimed at scientists. He said he wanted to reach the general public with his new book, which is full-color and lightweight.

Mr. Pretor-Pinney resists the idea that cloudspotting is merely funny, or even merely fun. Instead, he said, it’s a way of training yourself to be aware of the natural world, “of being receptive when something is happening in the sky and noticing it.”

Clouds are an important and necessary part of our environment, he notes, and anyway an endless succession of cloudless days would be boring. So Mr. Pretor-Pinney has little patience for people who dream of sunnier climes when clouds fill the sky.

“Happiness does not come from wanting to be somewhere else,” he said. “Happiness comes from finding beauty and a stimulation or interest in the everyday surroundings in which you find yourself.”