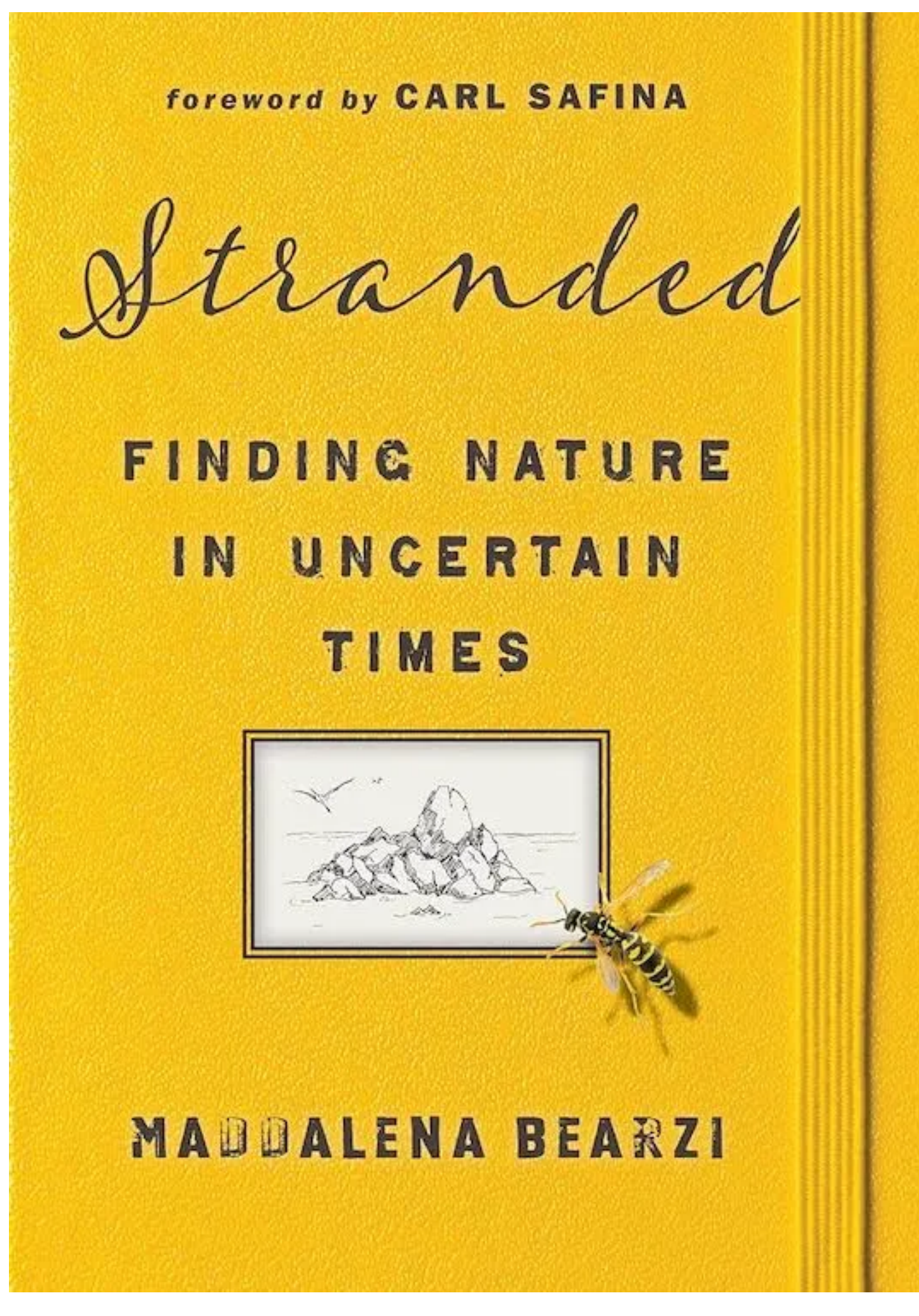


8 HOURS AGO

# Non-Fiction about Non-Humans: Maddalena Bearzi



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Maddalena Bearzi is the author of [Stranded: Finding Nature in Uncertain Times](#) and [Dolphin Confidential: Confessions of a Field Biologist](#), and she is the coauthor of [Beautiful Minds: The Parallel Lives of Great Apes and Dolphins](#). Bearzi is president and cofounder of Ocean Conservation Society. She holds a PhD in biology and a postdoctorate from UCLA, and she has been involved in studying marine mammals, with a conservation bias, since 1990. Her research on dolphins and whales off California represents one of the longest investigations worldwide, and she has published several scientific peer-reviewed papers. Her work and books have been covered by CNN, NPR, KPCC, Al Jazeera America, the Hallmark Channel, the Los Angeles Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Huffington Post, and American Scientist, among others. Bearzi has also been a writer for numerous media, including National Geographic. Born and raised in Italy, she now lives in Los Angeles with her husband and dog.

**EB:** It seems you've been studying animals almost your entire life, but how did you first begin writing about them?

**MB:** I've been writing about animals since I was young. Then I became a journalist (and a marine biologist), and I started writing about nature and travel for different magazines in Italy. I wanted to share what I learned from nature—not just to show the beauty of the world around us, but also to show the need for conservation. All my work is connected to animals and wildlife.

**EB:** How did your book [Stranded](#) come about? I love how it's written in the style of a COVID journal. Did it actually originate as journal entries?

**MB:** Yes, it did start as a sort of pandemic "archive." During COVID, I went from studying marine mammals out on the ocean to being landbound. I had no right to complain—I was living in a house with my husband, my dog, my backyard, and everything I needed—but I felt *stranded*... like a whale out of water. But I adapted, and, in my specific case, I latched onto the curiosity that drew me to ecology in the first place, back when I was still a child. When I was young, I always observed animals in my backyard. So I began to do it again, reconnecting with the nature in my garden and rediscovering the wilderness around me, without leaving the 5-mile radius around my house; I also took notes on my dog's habits, among other creatures. And I began to feel the same curiosity about these "ordinary" animals as I did when I was young, as if it was something I had forgotten after being out on the water studying dolphins for so many years. So I decided to share my nature adventures with others.

**EB:** While a lot of [Stranded](#) is about animals, you also dig into the ways people do and do not interact with the natural world. In particular, I was interested in your commentary on how people react to and interact with coyotes. How do you approach writing about people versus animals?

**MB:** Coyotes are fascinating to me in that they have adapted to live in urban metropolises. There were coyotes in Los Angeles before it was Los Angeles. We are the invaders, not them, and yet they've adapted to live among us—becoming more nocturnal and living on trash and scraps. We have all these fears about these animals, and we should wonder about where these fears come from, because, in most cases, they are not justified. I wanted to share my appreciation and my love for these animals and make people understand that coyotes are more wary of us than we are of them. If we can get to know them, we will start to appreciate them better. Coyotes help us in many ways—for instance, they help keep the rat population under control. But there is so much rage towards them in neighborhood groups like NextDoor. I feel sympathy for people who have lost their small pets to coyotes, but at the same time, we need to learn how to cohabitate with these animals and respect them.

**EB:** I was impressed by how much empathy you have for your fellow people, even if they are being fearful in an irrational sort of way.

**MB:** I wrote the book as a scientist, but I feel that everyone can be a citizen scientist. You just need to open your eyes. You need your power of observation, an open mind, and curiosity—that's it. Three simple and free ingredients that we all have. We can all learn a lot from nature.

**EB:** How did writing [Stranded](#) change your relationship to animals?

**MB:** It made me think (even more than before) about the wrongs we are doing to animals, how little nature is left, and how these animals need to continuously adapt to our chaotic world; and also how amazing it is that they are cohabitating with us. Many people rediscovered nature during the pandemic. Suddenly we could actually listen to birds, because we were traveling less and sitting still more. We also learned that nature can rebound if we allow it to.



**EB:** What do you think are some of the challenges of writing about subjects you can't interview directly? What are some of the rewards? And, in general, what do you think are the biggest challenges and rewards of writing nonfiction, not just nonfiction about animals?

**MB:** I think the challenging part is figuring out how to portray what these voiceless animals are really about. They are so fascinating in so many ways. The more we look at nature, the more we discover we are not the only conscious species out there. For instance, it's astounding to me how paper wasps can recognize each other's facial features! The challenge is also to make people understand that nonhuman animals are not just "things" we can step on, kill, eat, or destroy. What I found rewarding is that I could share my experiences of discovering and observing the *extraordinary* in the everyday *ordinary* with others.

Writing nonfiction requires both a lot of research and the use of the right words to express what you want to say to the general public, and those are two big challenges. The reward is to see your work published and read by others.

**EB:** Why do you think it is important that humans read and write about non-humans?

**MB:** We depend on nature. We depend on the oceans. And we tend to forget that, now more than ever. I want to make people understand how valuable nature is, and how much we need nature. We live in a delicate balance, and if we destroy this balance then we'll destroy ourselves.

As a scientist, writer, and someone who loves nature, my books are often "a call to action". I'm saying, look at how wonderful the natural world is, and you just can't wait for somebody else to save our planet.

**EB:** Who are some other writers that you admire who write nonfiction about non-humans?

**MB:** [Carl Safina](#) can talk about nature in a poetic way that engages the reader. [Ed Yong](#), in his latest book, reminds us that we all live in our own bubbles, and we tend not to look outside this bubble, forgetting that other animals are clever in their own way and in their own environment.

**EB:** Finally, who are the non-humans in your life right now?

**MB:** Genghis, my dog, was my companion during the Covid adventures, and he is always at my side, even now. And of course, the dolphins and the whales that I studied for a long time. I've spent most of my life learning about and from them.

**EB:** Anything else you want people to know?

**MB:** There is no need to be a scientist to appreciate the non-human animals around us. You just need your power of observation!

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