Return to Warden's Grove: Science, Desire, and the Lives of Sparrows
Christopher Norment. Univ. of Iowa, $26 (226p) ISBN 978-1-58729-633-8

For three summers, field biologist Norment (In the North of Our Lives) lived in a stand of spruce called Warden's Grove in the Canadian Northwest Territories, studying the breeding habits of a songbird known as Harris's sparrow. In this affecting book, he meditates on the desire for wilderness and solitude that drew him to such a remote place, and he tells what it's like to be alone for hours in a silent, forbidding environment observing an animal in its natural habitat. For him, scientific research can "contribute as much to an emotional, subjective relationship with the natural world as do art, literature, music, and poetry"; even taxonomy, often considered nothing more than the prosaic science of naming and classifying living things, has poetry. The official Latin name for Harris's sparrow, for example, means "the banded thrush with the whistle-like song," which beautifully evokes the essence of this little bird. As he reports on what he learned from his patient observation and reflects on the months he spent attempting to understand the birds' minds as well as his own, Norment eloquently affirms the beauty of biological fieldwork as a vital way "to pay attention to the world" and be connected with something outside the self. (Mar.)