

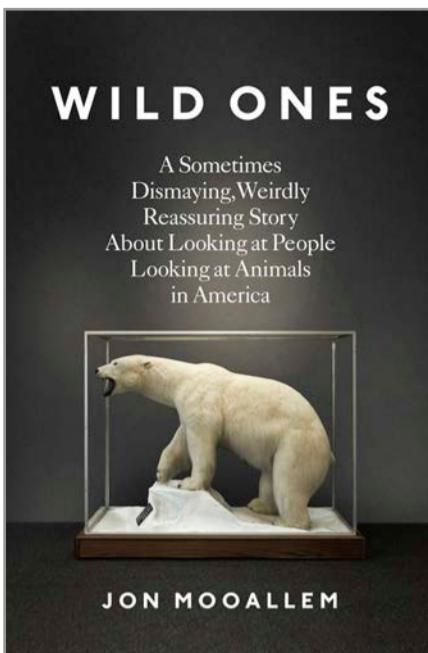
Animal Control

WILD ONES: A SOMETIMES DISMAYING, WEIRDLY REASSURING STORY ABOUT LOOKING AT PEOPLE LOOKING AT ANIMALS IN AMERICA

REVIEWED BY **DARCY COURTEAU**

WHEN CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS FIRST moored in the Caribbean, sea turtles were so plentiful that the sound of their carapaces thumping against the ships' hulls kept his crew awake at night. As late as the 19th century, passenger pigeons flew in flocks so large they blocked the sun and snapped the branches of trees on which they roosted, and herds of stampeding bison coming across the prairie slammed into trains with enough force to knock boxcars off their tracks.

Jon Mooallem digs up these stories in order to illustrate "shifting baselines syndrome," a term coined by a fisheries scientist in 1995 to name the sense each generation has that the North America it is born into is the natural one—no matter how the landscape has been altered since those insomniacs sailed into its waters. At the time of Columbus's arrival, other sources have noted, the



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native people were fashioning the wild to accommodate their farming and hunting—some animal populations may well have bubbled after the Indians' numbers declined—but the incursions were nowhere near being on par with those of the past few hundred years. The last passenger pigeon died in a Cincinnati zoo in 1914. Today, bison live in managed bands, while rats thrive. But without a search through the archives, who would know this isn't the way it's always been?

**Half of the planet's plant
and animal species may
disappear by 2100.**



JEFFREY PHELPS / AURORA PHOTOS / CORBIS

In a wildlife refuge in Necedah, Wisconsin, whooping cranes raised in captivity practice flying behind an ultralight aircraft. Come October, Operation Migration pilots will guide the birds on a 1,285-mile fall migration from Wisconsin to Florida.

Half of the planet's plant and animal species may disappear by 2100, Mooallem notes in the introduction to *Wild Ones*, victims of overhunting and overfishing, their habitats lost to mining, agriculture, and other industrial assaults. As a new father, he worried about his daughter's own developing "baseline" sensibilities, and determined to document (at times with the toddler in tow) the efforts now under way to preserve three endangered species. What he finds is that wildlife management "has evolved, or maybe devolved, into a surreal kind of performance art."

Churchill, Manitoba, on the edge of Hudson Bay, is the southernmost range of polar bears, and as such makes for a global warming canary in the coal

mine. Receding Arctic ice keeps the bears stranded on land, away from their fatty food source, seals, for ever-longer periods. Some are beginning to starve, and others are eating their young, while waiting for the winter ice. Polar bears are expected to go extinct, at least in most of their natural habitats, in a few decades.

No matter that the polar bear could gut you like a fish; from a distance, it looks like something you'd like to tuck under your arm at night, an impression that makes it the perfect poster child for endangered animals in general. The conservation group Polar Bears International (PBI) flies in a steady stream of concerned citizens and television crews who track around the tundra in enormous buggies to watch the bears,

while a PBI spokesperson, a former marketing executive, guilts them about climate change. Already, the Churchill community—as well as a larger world of conservationists—is considering the question of if and when it should start feeding the bears. Once that begins, the animals will be conservation reliant.

A handful of species living on the Antioch Dunes outside of San Francisco already are. The 120-foot-high masses of sand piled up over thousands of years were, within a few decades, leveled to make bricks and roads. Native plants that had evolved in the shifting, windblown dunes are now overrun by invasive species, and the Lange's metalmark, a butterfly that exists only on buckwheat growing on what's left of the dunes, is near extinction. The place came under federal protection in 1980, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service ordered that the butterflies be counted regularly. In the 1990s, the highest number of Lange's metalmarks spotted in an afternoon was in the thousands; now a typical afternoon yields a couple dozen. Twice a week, a motley crew of volunteers—Mooallem worked alongside a miscreant putting in community service hours for traffic violations—shows up to gaze at a laminated photo of the insect and trudge through the

dunes, hoping to see real-life matches. There's a breeding program in place, and much conservation work involves simply weeding the dunes.

The whooping crane is nearly as conservation reliant as the Lange's. The crane, a bird with an eight-foot wingspan and nasty temper, had soared the skies since the Pleistocene Epoch, until its population took a nosedive several decades ago, nearly exterminated by sport hunting and the draining of swampland habitats for agriculture. By the 1940s, only 30 survived. Now Operation Migration (OM) raises cranes in captivity and endeavors to release them in the wild. (About 275 whooping cranes exist today.) To keep the cranes from imprinting on them, conservationists wear white tent-like uniforms and stay silent as monks. A team of pilots in ultralight aircraft tries to lead cranes born in captivity along old migration routes from Florida to Wisconsin.

Citizens captivated by the effort, who call themselves "Craniacs," aren't allowed close to the birds, so for them, OM has "created an intimacy that's entirely vicarious." The Craniacs track the migratory route on the Internet, showing up at ports of call to buy T-shirts from and hand off pies to the crew.

For their part, the OM folks have sacrificed a lot to help the cranes; the pilots spend much of the year away from their families and wade through bureaucracy and politicking, and yet, they soldier on.

"Humanity caused the problem to begin with, and so it's very hard for humanity to solve the problem," one pilot says. "Because it's humanity! You know what I mean? We bring to the table all the same crap that was brought to the table to create the nightmare in the first place!" This is, Mooallem remarks, the most reassuring thing he's heard from a conservationist, the admission that though the people involved are imperfect, it's the striving that matters most. It isn't even about the birds, the pilot concludes: "It's a people project. The birds are an excuse for doing something good."

ADMIT TO HAVING INDULGED IN A BIT OF wishful thinking: *The experts will figure this out.* After reading Mooallem's book, I'll indulge no more. In fact, some of the best of the activists and experts have left the building. Joan McIntyre, who led the save-the-whales movement in the early 1970s, had her come-to-Jesus moment at a 1977 International Whaling Commission convention, where

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nations were bartering whaling rights while whale protection organizations clustered around the scene, competing for resources and recognition. Early one morning, she bought an armload of daffodils, placed bouquets on all the empty conference tables before the delegates arrived, and peaced out. She moved to Hawaii and watched whales from a tent pitched on a cliff.

Rudi Mattoni, one of the world's foremost lepidopterists, who once worked with the Lange's metalmark, called it quits, too. "People would say, 'How do we save the blue butterflies?'" he told Mooallem from his Buenos Aires hideout. "And I'd say, 'I don't give a shit about the blue butterflies.'" No one seemed to get that ecosystems, not individual species, are what need saving; habitats are too complex to reconstruct. He spends his days cataloging all the species that are sure to become extinct within the next few years.

These truants come in for a mild scolding. As bizarre and ultimately doomed as Mooallem admits conservation efforts have become, it is in fighting the good fight that he finds meaning. His voice throughout is humane, civilized, tolerant, and kind. He will easily duck the charge customarily used to discredit environmentalists, of practicing not so well as they preach. But despite the uplifting subtitle, "A Sometimes Dismaying, Weirdly Reassuring Story About Looking at People Looking at Animals in America," this book was not at all reassuring. In fact, it was terrifying.

The jets carrying ecotourists into Churchill to watch bears (an Internet-aided calculation indicates that a single passenger flying round-trip from Washington, D.C., would produce 1,700 pounds of carbon dioxide), the whole Lange's apparatus, the parking lots full of Craniacs—are a manifestation of what got us here: consumerism, delusions of power and control, and an apostolic faith in human intervention and industry. And that's not even taking into account the many times preservation efforts directly backfire, as when a year's crane crop of 18 juveniles died in a coastal storm surge, trapped in their cages.

A publicist's blurb on the back of my review copy promises that I won't have to suffer the "easy moralizing and nature worship of environmental journalism's older guard." I, for one, still turn to those very fogies who occupy pride of place on my bookshelf. Here's a favorite: *The Abstract Wild* (1996), by Jack Turner, a philosophy professor turned mountain climber turned, yes, nature worshiper. Turner's collection of essays criticizes wildlife management of all kinds, which has only anthropomorphized, domesticated, and otherwise packaged the wild into something no longer mysterious or sacred. "If you go to Mecca and blaspheme the Black Stone, the believers will feed you to the midges, piece by piece," he writes in an irritable rant that stops just short of defending ecoterrorism. "Go to Yellowstone and destroy grizzlies and grizzly habitat, and the believers will dress up in bear costumes, sing songs, and sign petitions. This is charming, but it suggests no sense of blasphemy."

On the same shelf are Rachel Carson (alarmist!) and, necessarily, Edward Abbey, gun toter, womanizer, carnivore, and runner of the mouth. "Crusaders for virtue are an awkward embarrassment to any society," he wrote of protestors gathering outside a nuclear weapons plant. "They force us to make choices: either

side with them, which is difficult and dangerous, or condemn them, which leads to self-betrayal.” Immoderate Abbey, his words salted with hypocrisy and braggadocio, declaring earth his religion and reading Thoreau by a campfire. For him, it was very much about the birds. The battle had not been lost, and the fight was for wild nature and our chance to be a part of it, not

for something existential or abstract. But he was born a few generations ago, when, I suppose, that goal still seemed possible. ■

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