



American Wild: Explorations from the Grand Canyon to the Arctic Ocean

Michael Engelhard

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“Call me a bigamist, if you like,” writes Michael Engelhard, a wildlife biologist and consummate storyteller whose passion for two vastly different American landscapes, separated by twenty-five hundred miles, has made him kin to those migratory creatures whose needs demand an equally peripatetic existence.

Engelhard, who calls himself “a vagrant by inclination and training” and a Luddite who neither drives nor owns a phone, is in love with the high desert of the Four Corners and the Colorado Plateau; with the American far north, Alaska, and the Arctic Refuge. He is addicted to landscapes defined by absences, to places that “streams, snow geese and caribou cross without passports”: “Long sightlines, the lack of dense forests or human populations, both in the Arctic and the Southwest set my heartstrings to humming,” he writes.

Honest to a fault, Engelhard doesn’t romanticize his experience of hiking Glen Canyon: “Blackbrush, locust, agaves, and carnivorous limestone gouged my forearms and shins,” he writes. “My knees and lower back ached, embedded spines festered, and the pack’s hip-belt left plum-colored bruises.” Yet he also writes of how the days could shine “robin’s egg blue, shimmering uniformly, like pearls on a string,” and of the delight he took in a “custard-colored scorpion.” He reevaluates his place in the food chain when attacked by fierce and prolific Alaskan mosquitoes and writes of two days in a tent, “whopped by wind like a helicopter”; of the “Iditabike,” a two-hundred-mile race requiring pepper spray to ward off wolves; of the joy of paddling a solitary kayak through nature’s deep silence; and of “light dense and golden as mead.”

Thoroughly at home in these wild places and among their creatures, Engelhard is a worthy guide across thresholds that can provoke profound, irrevocable change.

KRISTINE MORRIS (March/April 2017)

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