

No Way Home: The Decline of the World's Great Animal Migrations

David Wilcove

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Tens of millions of passenger pigeons would block the sun for days during their southward migrations in the early 1800s. By 1900 not one single passenger pigeon was left in the wild. The very last of them, Martha, died in the Cincinnati Zoo on September 1, 1914.

No Way Home presents numerous examples of migratory species that seem to be heading down the same dead end path as Martha's brethren, but this is no doom and gloom tome written by a self-righteous conservationist looking to condemn the rest of humanity for its crimes against nature. Rather, Wilcove, a professor of ecology, evolutionary biology, and public affairs at Princeton University, and author of *The Condor's Shadow*, offers a seamless blend of research and personal experience that presents the history of migration, the problems facing species that migrate, and examples of programs that have had success in reviving declining populations.

In 1930 it was estimated that only a few dozen gray whales remained along the Pacific Coast of North America. In the early 1970s the Mexican government declared the whales' breeding grounds along the Baja Peninsula sanctuaries, and the population began to rebound. To further the chances of success, the conservation organization, local citizens in Mexico have been trained as whale watching guides. With an economic stake in the well-being of the whales, communities all along the Pacific coastline have taken up the call to protect them.

Wilcove has witnessed migrating species from the African plains to the sparse woodlots of central Illinois, and his first-hand accounts of observation in the field lend an engaging, travel-journal feel to the writing: "The [male grassland sparrows] shoot up into the sky like little champagne corks, singing vigorously as they climb." This style will appeal to the general public interested in the environment as well as to students of biology and ecology.

Wilcove consents that it is most likely too late to recreate the great migrations that have already been lost, such as those of the American bison and the wild Atlantic salmon. He argues that people need to realize the intrinsic value of migrations and work to preserve this awe-inspiring phenomenon before a species dwindles to the edge of extinction. "A dozen cranes rising from the Platte River at dawn during their spring migration is a beautiful sight," he writes, "five hundred thousand doing the same thing is miraculous."

CHRISTINE CANFIELD (October 9, 2007)

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