

Washington Post (Book World)

Long Day's Journey into Night

How our restlessness is affecting other creatures on the go.

Reviewed by David Gessner
Sunday, March 2, 2008; BW08

NO WAY HOME

The Decline of The World's Great Animal Migrations

By David S. Wilcove

Island Press. 245 pp. \$24.95

The world is doomed.

This is not breaking news. At least not to the environmentally attuned reader. To the litany of melting ice caps, reduced habitat and killer hurricanes, we can now add not just the extirpation of countless animal species but also the possible end of the great and stirring phenomenon of migration itself.

This grim, somewhat apocalyptic news is broken by an understated doomsayer named David Wilcove. In *No Way Home*, Wilcove lucidly describes the journeys of some familiar migratory superstars: monarch butterflies making their generational round trip between the northern United States and the mountains of [Mexico](#), right whales dodging boats and fishing nets as they navigate the shipping lanes off our Northeast coast, already over-fished salmon blocked by dams, and wildebeests whose wild African territory has become no more than an oversized zoo.

The author doesn't overwork the awe aspect of these journeys, perhaps because they speak for themselves. Consider just the monarch: Its fluttery trip south defines precariousness -- to watch one travel is like seeing a piece of [Kleenex](#) migrate -- but somehow, using the sun as a compass, it makes its way back to its ancient home of spruce trees in a once-hidden mountainous forest in Mexico. Then, in the spring, it heads back north, laying its eggs in milkweeds along the way so that its young and their young can complete the return trip.

The motivation for migration is often evolutionary opportunism, being in the right place when the right food is there (when the milkweeds are blooming, for instance). But for animals, times of movement are times of peril. As Wilcove points out, migration, always a great feat of exertion and endurance, has never been more dangerous, and animals now face four relatively new threats: "habitat destruction, human-created obstacles, overexploitation, and climate change." In other words, while they are busy running or flying or swimming their particular marathons, animals are also contending with being

hunted or fished, dodging nets and cell towers, and finding fewer patches of wildness to serve as pit stops. Then throw in the fact that the seasons have turned screwy, which is no minor inconvenience when your trip depends on exquisite timing.

Think of the poor Red Knots, robin-sized birds that fly up from Tierra del Fuego on their way to spending their summer in the Canadian tundra. They need to land on the shores of Delaware Bay just when the local horseshoe crabs are laying their eggs. If the horseshoe crabs are early, or late, there is no food, and if there is no food, there is no energy for the next leg of their 10,000-mile jaunt.

Wilcove, a professor of evolutionary biology and ecology at [Princeton](#), has the science cred, but his book is clearly written for the non-scientist, and the sentences are brisk and no-nonsense. He's not after lyricism; he does well simply to present the facts and stay out of the way. The very occasional authorial intrusions -- I counted a grand total of three -- are off-putting, as when we are told, "Patience is not my strong suit" by a narrator who to that point has remained invisible.

Each chapter follows a pattern: a description of a particular migration, a scientific explanation of how and why it takes place, and an inventory of the current, often fairly overwhelming, manmade threats to that migration.

It could be depressing to dwell on the contrast between the wonder of these migratory feats and the dismal idiocy of so many of the roadblocks we've created for the migrants, but Wilcove's straightforward style makes the book less of a cri de coeur than a state-of-migration report, educational and important. In fact, it is refreshing to read a book like this without the mandatory apocalyptic screed. This Mr. Spock-like confession is about as far as the author goes: "Having spent a day in the company of right whales, I don't pretend to have a dispassionate view of their fate."

But if Wilcove were of a more philosophical bent, he might have considered what compels the massive globe-wide restlessness he describes, particularly when it comes to the species now overrunning the Earth. Hunger drives us as surely as it does loggerhead turtles, though our hunger is not always the physical sort. Scientists are the only human heroes in this book, but aren't they, with their constant trapping, marking and weighing, benign cousins to the beach-devouring developers? Isn't it the encoded inability of homo sapiens to stay still, to refrain from uncovering, digging into, and spreading across the globe, that makes it harder for other species to do the same?

And how are we -- chronically curious, inventive and inventing -- ever to begin to understand the consequences of our tinkering? Surely the scientist who created the first genetically modified, herbicide-resistant crops believed he was on to something good, never thinking that when the fields were sprayed, the milkweeds would die and the monarchs would lose what they had been fluttering thousands of miles to find. *

David Gessner is the author of six books of nonfiction and editor of the literary journal Ecotone. He is the 2007 winner of the John Burroughs essay award.

