



North on the Wing: Travels with the Songbird Migration of Spring

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BOOK REVIEW

North on the Wing: Travels with the Songbird Migration of Spring

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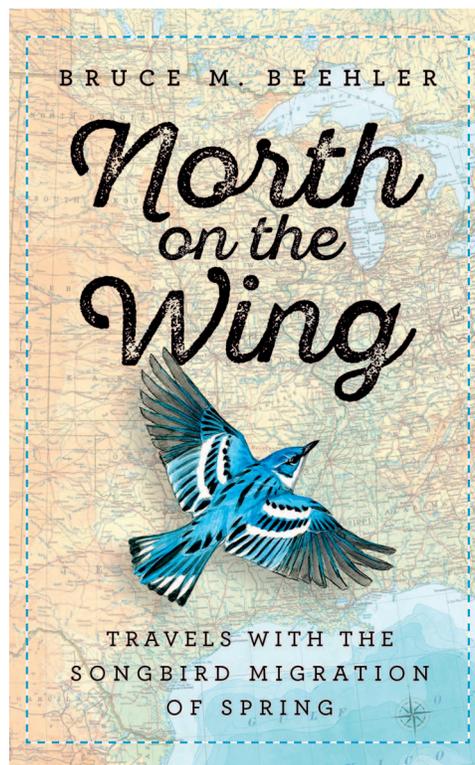
North on the Wing: Travels with the Songbird Migration of Spring by Bruce M. Beehler. 2018. Smithsonian Books, Washington, DC, USA. x + 246 pp., numerous black-and-white text photographs and illustrations. \$24.95 (cloth). ISBN 978-1-58834-613-1.

North on the Wing is an account of Bruce Beehler's 100-day journey following Neotropical migrant birds from their landfall upon the windswept coastal islands of the Gulf of Mexico up the Mississippi River to the rich boreal forests of central Canada. Inspired by an earlier epic trip by Edwin Way Teale (1978), Beehler launched his own journey with the objectives of experiencing the magnificent spectacle of migration, documenting the efforts of researchers and conservationists to conserve migrant birds and their habitats, and, last but not least, indulging in a bird-watcher's passion for migrant watching. During migration, with billions of birds in transit, the birder is treated to numbers and diversity of species far greater than during the breeding season, and migration watchers are provided the opportunity to welcome familiar species as they repopulate our forests, and to experience the thrill of encountering unexpected rarities for a brief moment as they travel to their remote breeding grounds.

Beehler also promises an account of life on the road, and the images and anecdotes of his journey, during both movement and stopover, provide a tapestry into which the other elements of this book are woven, making the book fun to read. Few of us will ever have the opportunity

to follow Beehler's travel itinerary through some of the continent's richest and most interesting natural places, yet through his account we experience the excitement of waking in a tent to 100 dawn choruses and spending days exploring the trails, waterways, and back roads of this continent. There is something for everyone in the book. It will be enjoyable for anyone who enjoys casting off the traces of the day-to-day routine and taking to the open road. Birdwatchers will appreciate vicarious accounts of adventures, like a treeline filling up with migrants swarming fresh off the Gulf, and daily lists of flycatchers, tanagers, vireos, and especially wood warblers, including rarities like the endangered Kirtland's Warbler (*Setophaga kirtlandii*). For the beginning bird student or curious recreational birder, the text is packed with accounts of the ecology of migrant birds throughout their annual cycle—from their wintering grounds, either staking out a territory or drifting around with

mixed flocks, to their epic leap across the Gulf and their scramble after landfall to refuel, to the drama of the breeding grounds as they stake out a territory and attract a mate. For the general naturalist, the book includes descriptions of the geology, ecology, and history of the ecosystems Beehler visited along his itinerary, including coastal prairie, bottomland forests, cypress swamps, jack pine barrens, and spruce bogs. Additionally, his tale includes encounters with species other than birds, such as various herpetofauna and a rich and ever-changing flora.



Dr. Beehler is an accomplished ornithologist, and as a result most of the material is authoritative. However, his insistence, in at least two places in the book, that warblers largely return to their natal territory is perplexing, given that a recent review of decades of research on warblers and other songbirds on the breeding grounds (Schlossberg 2009) suggests that natal returns by forest songbirds are very rare (~3%). Beehler's understanding of conservation issues is obviously sophisticated as well, but—speaking as one who constantly polices my own activities and those of my neighbors—the contribution of the book to conservation might have benefited from some reflection about his use of playback to lure birds and his feeding of wildlife around his campsite.

It seems that every account of a spectacular natural phenomenon in this book is followed by grim statistics of its imperilment, and Beehler does not shy away from the daunting challenges migrants face as their habitat is shorn and contaminated and as they fall victim to house cats, window strikes, and the like. Fortunately, he makes a point of visiting dedicated researchers and conservationists who are striving to understand the challenges and needs of migrant populations and to implement policies and

practices that conserve them. These range from field biologists who are studying the ecology of newly arrived migrants, to concerned-citizen groups dedicated to preserving stopover habitat, to state and federal agencies, non-governmental organizations, and even, in some cases, private industry. Good news on the environment is often overshadowed by the century's unfolding environmental catastrophe, but Beehler leaves us with the comforting knowledge that a large and growing community of dedicated conservationists at all levels, from local to international, are working tirelessly to ensure that the spectacle of avian migration endures for generations to come.

LITERATURE CITED

- Schlossberg, S. (2009). Site fidelity of shrubland and forest birds. *The Condor* 111:238–246.
- Teale, E. W. (1978). *A Walk through the Year*. Dodd, Mead, New York, NY, USA.

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