

Introduction

On a gun-metal gray day in June 1947, naturalist Edwin Way Teale stood high atop the headlands of Cape Cod, his thin tie flapping against his pressed white shirt. He and his wife, Nellie, scanned the waves for signs of life—eiders, storm petrels, herring gulls—but saw only endless sea, beneath which he imagined lay a Lost Atlantis. This couple had spent fifteen weeks pursuing the signs of spring from the Everglades to the Canadian border. The highlights of their excursion included a 6-foot-long rattlesnake, 2,000 glossy ibises, waves of migrating warblers, and a fire that consumed John Burroughs's famous home.

Sixty-five years later to the day, I stand looking out over Cahoons Hollow from my predecessor's elevated perch. In the water below bob dark, cowled silhouettes. Male gray seals, comparatively recent arrivals, now patrol the coastline with the help of federal protection. A few hours later, in a location where Teale knelt to study ant colonies, I stand beside naturalist Robert Finch, who recites a list of other animals that have made a comeback on the Outer Cape: foxes, fishers, turkeys, deer, coyotes, even pine martens. And as we prepare to depart, out of the shadows steps a 200-pound black bear, its cinnamon fur lustrous, its broad stride effortless as it ambles up a hill. The first of its kind to roam this island in more than two

centuries, this harbinger of wildness has attracted national media attention by swimming the inlet, foraging the length of the Cape, and now turning for home.

We take for granted that we live in a diminished world, that the bounty our grandparents knew has passed forever from the face of the earth. In fact, many places along the east coast, even locations as seemingly settled as Cape Cod, have grown wilder since the author of *North with the Spring* described them. I know because I have stood in these places, following in the footsteps of Edwin Way Teale, the most famous American naturalist in the decades between Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson. Week after week from February through June I stopped where he stopped, compared his lists of flowers, insects, and birds, and bore witness to an ever-warming climate. This book, part field guide, part road trip, documents and celebrates America's east coast wild legacy.

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Plotting the Course

At such a time, when you look with dread upon the winter weeks that lie before you, have you ever dreamed—in office or kitchen or school—of leaving winter behind, of meeting spring under far-southern skies, of following its triumphal pilgrimage up the map with flowers all the way, with singing birds and soft air, green grass and trees new-clothed, of coming north with the spring?

EDWIN WAY TEALE, *North with the Spring*

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A dozen restless robins balance atop sumac branches on a south-facing slope not far from my New Hampshire home. It's late January, midday, and the temperature has peaked at 3 degrees. Jockeying for position among the red-tipped crowns, the flock appears edgy, and I wonder if this frigid air has rekindled their migratory urge, that ancient instinct to join their brethren in warmer climes. Fifty generations ago robins took wing: only the heartiest species remained—the junco, chickadee, red-tailed hawk, and downy woodpecker. Today I glimpse cardinals, bluebirds, titmice, and purple finches, even a stalwart mockingbird, hunkered down against harsh New England squalls. Like these pioneers I too remain in place, impatient and unsettled in the frozen heart of winter. What would it be like—just this once—to sever ties that hold me here, to follow

the full tide of the season rising north through 100 days of spring?

Edwin Way Teale set out to answer this question—to trace “firsthand, the long northward flow of the season.” Unhappy as a schoolteacher and frustrated as a contributing editor to *Popular Science*, he resigned his post in 1941, determined to follow his own literary inclinations. He plotted a new course, corresponded with colleagues, and waited for a world war to draw to its bloody close. This war cost Edwin and Nellie the life of their only child, David, who died in action in Germany at age nineteen a month before the war’s end. This tragedy shattered Edwin’s dream and his motivation to write. Their decision to set out in 1947 was thus an enormous gamble, one designed to resurrect hope and to rediscover the equipoise he had lost. The struggle ultimately paid off, for *North with the Spring*, the record of their trip, became a best seller in 1951. Though little remembered today, Teale went on to write eighteen additional volumes and to win a Pulitzer Prize.

“We first smelled smoke as we came creeping down a long green tunnel under overarching trees on a narrow road pock-marked with holes.” So begins an adventure in which almost every sentence starts with the pronoun “we,” for the author shares his every encounter with Nellie Donovan, his partner throughout the excursion. It was Nellie who urged Edwin to push ahead through the Everglades fire and she who repeatedly rescued her husband from the whirlpool of despair. Physically strong and by nature stoic, Nellie accepted the fact that her husband “was more up and down than I had realized. Oh, if things went well, he was way up in the air. . . . And then if things weren’t going too well, [he was] way down in the dumps.” Her role in the success of this project and the importance of her companionship thereafter have never been sufficiently recognized.

Edwin acknowledged his dependence on Nellie and called attention to her influence throughout *North with the Spring*.

The volume's index lists twenty-four page references beside her name, and its earliest entry underscores his "added pleasure" when, after twenty-eight years of marriage, she remains "the most congenial person still." An accomplished birder in her own right, Nellie had grown up estranged from her father and forced to look after herself from an early age. Letters passed between the couple during their courtship suggest that she was the more pragmatic as well as the more courageous. Replying to an introductory note sent by Edwin's mother, for example, she responded: "I shall be frank Mrs. Teale—I am afraid of you but not of your criticism. Keep criticizing to any extent for I appreciate it and thank you for it." Such candor, coupled with the steadfast conviction in Edwin's talents, allowed Nellie to play both confidante and guide.

Almost every American looked forward to getting away from home in 1947, after years of suffering and sacrifice. Young people in particular were anxious to throw off the constraints imposed by war. Jack Kerouac, the voice of this new generation, began his *On the Road* adventure during the same year in which Edwin and Nellie set out to follow spring. In many ways the automobile came to symbolize our nation's latent hunger: sleek, shiny, and self-enclosed, cars offered "a speedy, glamorous escape from social conformity." Fifty-four percent of American families owned autos in 1947; by 1960 that number had grown to 77 percent. The federal government paid for the construction of countless superhighways during these intervening years. Sensitive to the times, Edwin Teale fretted that his expedition would seem out of step: "We meet no man-eating bears, encounter no moonshiners or lurid lynching parties." As compared with the "spine-tingling episodes" featured on radio, for television was still in its infancy, he worried that the volume he envisioned would be judged "too quiet for the times."

Rereading *North with the Spring*, with its magical chapter titles—"The Trembling Trees," "Limpkin River," "A Hundred

Miles of Warblers,” “The Poisoned Hills”—I found myself slowing down, trusting my senses, finding pleasure in its vivid, vernal portraits. I began to ask myself what had happened to those remote wild places the author meticulously described—most of them unknown to the average American, and many only vaguely delineated on roadway maps. Had development silenced the Florida limpkins? Had time softened or technology transformed the raw, red hillsides of Tennessee’s Ducktown desert? Had our insatiable appetite for suburban sprawl eviscerated the Okefenokee Swamp or the New Jersey Pine Barrens? And how had global warming affected these vulnerable landscapes?

As a long-awaited sabbatical approached, I began to dream Teale’s dream and to study his early life. *Dune Boy*, an autobiography he published in 1943, portrayed a young Edwin set free to explore the natural world on his grandparents’ farm in the sand county region of Indiana. Shy in school and therefore frequently bullied, he chafed under the strict discipline of his Quaker parents and educated himself by reading field guides and taking long summer walks at Lone Oak Farm. Insects became his passion, and Edwin began to experiment with a camera as an adolescent.

Teale became an accomplished photographer and writer, and I spent time studying the negatives he preserved as well as journals from his travels at the archives at the University of Connecticut. A meticulous organizer, he documented each day of their adventure following spring in longhand, filling journals with observations, private musings, and records of every bird they witnessed and every expense they incurred. I had little trouble plotting my route, prioritizing my points of interest, researching what had transpired in the intervening years. The first half of the journey from Florida to Tennessee represented terra incognita for me, and Teale’s reports of floating islands, limestone springs, white sand beaches, and trackless swamps made me eager to begin.

Those who travel frequently report that each journey is like an individual person and that, at some point in the excursion, the trip begins to take the traveler. A look at Teale's daily expense ledger underscored these lessons. Breakfasts for the couple averaged less than \$2.00, and the combined total for a steak supper outside Orlando, Florida, was \$3.40, with a 25-cent tip. The roadside cottages where they typically spent the night rented for \$3.50, and gasoline for their black Buick sedan averaged 26 cents a gallon. They splurged 80 cents for an occasional movie (*It's a Wonderful Life* was a favorite), and spent just over \$1.00 to have Edwin's suit coats pressed. Twenty cents bought a *Saturday Evening Post* and a pack of chewing gum.

On February 14, Valentine's Day, 2012, I set off with my wife, Susie, sitting beside me. Like my mentor we were surrounded by "maps . . . bird glasses, field guides, and cameras." Snow was in the air that morning, and we slipped across the George Washington Bridge not long after traffic had cleared. The first leg of our journey together was unremarkable, as we stopped for gas somewhere in northern New Jersey. The attendant rang up \$53—about what Edwin and Nellie had paid for their entire first week.