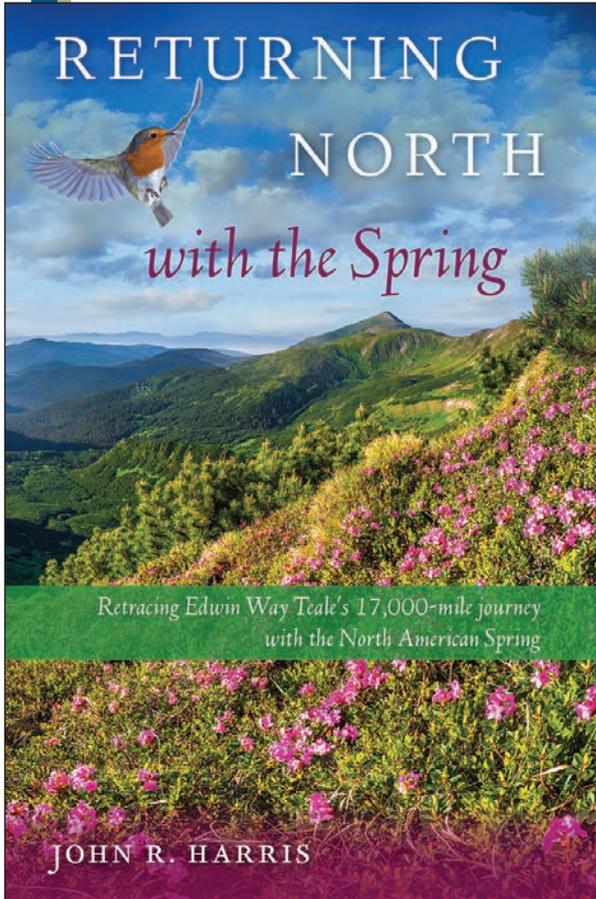


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RETURNING NORTH WITH THE SPRING

JOHN R. HARRIS

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JOHN R. HARRIS has served as executive director of the Monadnock Institute of Nature, Place, and Culture at Franklin Pierce University since 1996. He was editorial assistant for *Where the Mountain Stands Alone* and editor of *Beyond the Notches*. He also played an important role in the Reflections Oral History Project, which produced five films documenting places and events in the region's past. Dr. Harris teaches courses in nature writing, environmental thought, and regional history at Franklin Pierce University. He has lived in Westmoreland, New Hampshire, with his wife and three daughters since 1985.

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is available for interviews and appearances.



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Q&A with **JOHN R. HARRIS** author of *Returning North with the Spring*

Your book retraces the 17,000-mile journey that naturalist Edwin Way Teale recounts taking in his book, *North with the Spring*. When did you first read his book, and why did the story have such tremendous staying power for you?

I first read Teale's seasonal account in high school, and as a young man I was immediately drawn in by the author's quest for remote wild places and by the book's chapter titles: "The Trembling Trees," "A Hundred Miles of Warblers," and "The Poisoned Hills," for example. His detailed portrait of the spring season continues to resonate today because we live in a time of dramatic climate change.

What motivated you to follow Edwin Way Teale's route, and how did you ensure you followed his route precisely?

From the beginning I was interested in discovering what had changed over 65 years in the flora and fauna of each landscape Teale visited. I took his journals with me and read key passages each morning before I set out on my own exploration. In that way I was able to compare what he had seen directly with what I observed at the same location on the same calendar date.

In what ways do the stories that you tell differ from those that Teale relates in his narrative?

Teale wrote in the decade before significant environmental losses were exposed. Today, our relationship with nature almost always emphasizes diminishment. Therefore, what was surprising and rewarding to me was the realization that many of the places he described have grown wilder, with more mature trees and a greater diversity of birds and animals than when he visited. My excursion included many opportunities for celebration in the face of despair.

If Teale were able to follow his course again now, how do you think he would react to the changes in the environment?

Edwin took his journey with his wife, Nellie, and I believe they both would have mixed feelings. They would be gratified that so many of the vulnerable places they visited have been protected and preserved. They would also applaud the progress we've made in civil rights and ecological conscience. However, the couple would be deeply troubled by the consequences of global warming, particularly the steady rise in numbers of invasive species as well as trophic mismatches, the disconnect between the emergence of one species (plant or insect) and the arrival of another (pollinator or animal) that once depended on it. In addition, he and Nellie would be shocked and saddened by our extreme levels of wealth and consumption.

Of the places you visited, which one has undergone the most dramatic change since Teale's day?

The Ducktown Desert in Tennessee has been completely transformed since 1947. Teale was skeptical that this blighted landscape, which had been poisoned by sulfuric acid as a result of copper roasting, could ever be healed and restored. Today, the town sports green lawns, pine forests, courting birds, and skipping children.

Why do you think Teale's work has not seemed to enjoy the same timelessness that other nature narratives have?

Teale's genial tone, like that of John Burroughs, is reminiscent of an earlier age. Much of the environmental writing that followed Teale featured a polemical, adversarial tone. I remain convinced that Teale's books on the seasons have much to teach us not only about close observation but also about empathy for all living things and how we might appreciate each other's company.

Who are your favorite authors, and how have they influenced or informed your own work?

I discuss a couple of my favorite authors—in particular Annie Dillard, John Terres, and Robert Finch—in my book. Each of these writers sees the natural world in a new and distinctive way, and I suspect I've learned a number of important lessons in how to craft prose through the study of their works. I'm also a big fan of Barry Lopez and Terry Tempest Williams.

What do you hope readers will enjoy the most about your book?

The journey—following the progress of spring northward in the footsteps of Edwin Way Teale. In the company of numerous experts, I gained a new appreciation for the intricacy and splendor of the natural world. I stood spellbound in the presence of fabulous birds, paddled alligator-infested swamps, biked popular rail trails, and documented the preservation and rewilding of many vulnerable places my predecessor described.

What are you working on next?

I've begun to focus my attention on the natural history of my home ground of Southern New Hampshire. I'm interested in exploring in greater depth the places I have grown familiar with over more than thirty years. This yearning feels a bit like Teale's desire to catalogue his home region in one of his other books, *A Naturalist Buys an Old Farm*.

The Wildest Place

For miles, we rode slowly along the road, only a foot or so above the level of a vast cypress slough, the trees shining silver, the bunched air-plants a feature of virtually every tree. . . . On the map two non-existent towns—Trail City and Pinecrest—are shown. We saw not a single house—once or twice faint road markings that led off into the pines or palmettos—nothing more.

EDWIN WAY TEALE, *JOURNAL OF North with the Spring*

On February 21, binoculars in hand, Edwin Teale stepped out from behind the wheel of his Buick sedan parked along the shoulder of the Tamiami Trail, a raised ribbon of concrete bisecting the Everglades that had cost a staggering \$25,000 per mile to complete in 1928. Cars whizzed by as he and Nellie focused their attention on a nearby borrow pit, where countless wading birds fed. They noted herons alighting in the tops of cypress trees, red-shouldered hawks “with their piercing ‘Kee-You’ whistle,” and hundreds of American egrets “whose rhythmic wing-beats suggested a waltz.” Their long-awaited journey had begun, and the couple rejoiced in the spectacle of migrating birds: boat-tailed grackles, the “okalee” of redwings, and a single Everglades kite silhouetted against “a copper-burnished sunset.”

These sojourners were well aware of the poignancy of their pilgrimage. By “leaving everyday responsibilities behind” and gradually drifting north, they were rehearsing a dream shared by millions of Americans, and in their choice of spring, that season of hope, they extolled “belief and optimism . . . where all things seem possible.” They also recognized that for thousands like themselves, the joys of slowing down and the excitement of identifying new creatures and meeting new friends would hold only momentary pleasure. Thus, as he drove past houses on the edge of the Everglades, Edwin lamented that they knew nothing of the people inside—“only this we know: troubles, troubles of some kind—money worries, illness, worries over children.” Months of immersion in places judged remote, together with Nellie’s constant optimism, would be required to lift this veil.

On February 21, 2012, sixty-five years later to the day, I arrive at the Tamiami Trail. The cramped huts and thatched roofs of Seminole Indians bear a striking resemblance to Teale’s depictions, and lush green air plants wave from every tree. Recently elevated via bridges and causeways to encourage the flow of water beneath, the Tamiami highway now forms the northeast boundary of Everglades National Park. Therefore, I stop here only briefly, noting a few birds as well as relentless tourist traffic before continuing south to Homestead, where I pick up the former Ingraham highway, a road unavailable to Teale due to heavy rains when he arrived. Parking at the Royal Palm Visitor Center, I head for the Anhinga Trail, a celebrated stretch of boardwalk following Taylor Slough and located almost 50 miles south of where Teale once stood.

A tall woman with close-cropped silver hair and an inviting smile waves to welcome me onto the boardwalk. Anne McCrary Sullivan, the park’s resident poet and a birder like Nellie Teale, has expressed an interest in my project and scheduled this location for us to meet. Without hesitation she takes me to her favorite outpost midway along the trail. Here she tells me what



An aninga perches on its namesake trail in Everglades National Park.
Photo by author.

she witnessed the day she arrived three years earlier: sight-seers pointing cameras, egrets gliding out beyond pond apple trees on the opposite shore, and those theatrical snakebirds, the aningas, hissing to one another in sudden alarm. Far out along the edge of land and water lay a writhing mass of snake and alligator.

The dark outline of the plated gator churns toward the slough, its tail thrashing, and wrapped twice around its mid-section is an enormous coil of smooth-skinned python. Dark olive, with fawn-brown stippling, the snake pokes up its head, its thick muscle searching for another point of anchor. Soon the pair explodes into the water and disappears beneath the lilies, a foaming brown wave scattering birds in all directions.

Ten minutes later the reptiles resurface: the python wrapped tightly around the gator's snout. It lifts its head once more, opens its mouth to breathe, and squeezes with greater force. The alligator responds by again submerging its attacker. This time it's nearly twenty minutes before the pair resurfaces, and the gator has managed to get a piece of the snake's thick midsection between its jaws. The eyes of both creatures, now mere slits, suggest neither retreat nor fright.

All afternoon the battle wages. The alligator thrusts up its snout, waiting to feel a pressure subside: the python, in response, rises above the surface and glares. Hour after hour, from slough to shoreline, the struggle continues. By sunset both reptiles are clearly spent, motionless—yet neither appears capable of finding a way apart.

At first light the creatures remain locked in their embrace, exhausted along shore, each awaiting an uncertain end. Then suddenly something lets go. A slip of a coil, the jaw relaxed, and the snake hangs free almost without awareness of its uncoupling. Time suspends them for a frozen moment, and then they separate—moving away from each other faster than Anne imagined possible.

Scenes like this one, memorialized in her poem “Holding On,” characterize the new Everglades, a treeless jungle where invasive and voracious predators lie in stealth, threatening everything smaller than adult deer and gradually moving north. According to park wildlife officials, as many as 100,000 Burmese pythons may be lurking in the shallows, and a study conducted in 2011 indicated that 95 percent of the mid-sized mammals once observable along roadways have disappeared. I spend the remainder of the afternoon pacing this boardwalk, hoping to glimpse a surfacing snake. After countless highway miles, I gradually return to my senses, marveling at the an-hinga's gem-blue eyes and basking in the wetland's fecund air. Wading birds, ducks, and tree swallows enter and exit my field of vision. The black-backed carapace of a softshell turtle

materializes, and the shadow of a snakebird glides beneath. Emerald-bright dragonflies, coupled in their mating dance, stitch the water's surface. Meanwhile, dozens of tourists saunter past, pause briefly to follow my gaze, and head on toward the parking lot.

Over a campfire that evening, Anne adds to the list of invasive species, citing creatures left out of Teale's comprehensive index. These include Brazilian pepper plants, green iguanas, and walking catfish. Many of these exotics are recent arrivals, products of a poorly regulated pet and horticultural trade. Others like the melaleuca tree, a native of Australia, have been here for more than half a century. Real estate developers desperate to dry out these wetlands in the 1930s hired crop dusters to fill the air with melaleuca seeds. As a result, these trees now cover more than 500,000 acres of southern Florida, where they continue to expand at a rate of 55 acres per day.

Anne's love for this sawgrass landscape is inspired by nostalgia for the African savanna where she once lived. I detect in her voice a sense of loss, a longing for family far away and yet still loved. The silence that hangs between us brings to mind my own absent father, who died of lung cancer two months before my journey began. Our whole family had gathered at Thanksgiving, sensing that the end was near. By then his skin was papery thin, and we lifted his wheelchair up the front steps. His mind seemed ever active, however, and he quizzed me once more about my trip: where I planned to stay, what I hoped to discover, why I needed to sleep in the truck. Three weeks later his lungs gave out.

The drive from North Carolina, where I dropped Susie off to visit family, to Everglades National Park was filled with reminiscing. I had helped my father edit his autobiography, which he dedicated to his grandchildren in the hope that they might understand the arc of his career. In the work he struggled to explain how his father's early death had shaped the remainder of his long life. At age ten he assumed responsibility for

his mother and two younger sisters, who remained his closest confidantes. His mother had followed him to college and lived with him during the hectic years of medical school. Like Edwin Teale, my father was exceptionally frugal, ambitious, and never quite satisfied in his accomplishments. He loved people, enjoyed being the center of attention, and yet lived out his final years almost deaf, partially blind, and utterly alone. Susie and I visited his Long Island condominium as often as we could, and twice a year I made a pilgrimage with him to the farmhouse he had purchased in rural Pennsylvania. He'd envisioned this place as a family retreat; however, with each passing year, my brothers and then my mother grew more distant. Every parent's death creates an empty space, one I hoped to fill by following spring.

Anne Sullivan proved an ideal guide, helping me appreciate the size and scope of the Everglades. The vastness of this alien landscape had confounded its earliest promoters, men like Barron Collier who, after falling in love with the state in 1911, spent \$17 million over the next decade acquiring more than a million acres, making him Florida's largest landholder. He initiated a series of disastrous drainage projects south of Miami and later won the contract to complete the Tamiami highway. Collier also financed the construction of Everglades City, the proposed hub for his real estate empire. The Teales had spent their third night in this company town, where the Collier Corporation still owned "every store and every business building." Today, only remnants of Collier's failed vision remain—the wide main boulevard flanked by stately palms, the Doric columns that decorate city hall. For the discerning eye, Anne told me, these subtle reminders of private wealth and rapacious development are everywhere evident in Florida's coastal communities.

Only national park designation saved the Everglades from complete desecration. Its hummocks of cypress, mangrove, palmetto, and pine at first glance appear as wild, remote, and

impenetrable as when Edwin and Nellie ventured onto the Fish and Wildlife loop road depicted in the chapter epigraph. Pinecrest, the town Teale mentions, is emblematic of the failed dreams of those early entrepreneurs. Home to some 200 gladesmen in the 1920s, this outpost never garnered the luster that its founder James Jaudon envisioned. When Jaudon lost the competition with Collier over the route of the Tamiami, his hope of attracting thousands of tourists to his Chevelier development subsided, and the road to nowhere he had sponsored gradually returned to forest. In 1947 National Park officials, mandated to re-create a “pristine” wilderness within the Everglades, worked to remove the last vestiges of civilization. Today only a handful of tourists venture onto the loop road, which serves as a southern terminus for one of the rare radio-collared female Florida panthers, the most endangered predator on the east coast. Biologists remain divided as to whether inbreeding has pushed this magnificent species past the point of viability.

In *Liquid Land* Ted Levin portrays the true Everglades as “bridled and balkanized by 1,074 miles of canals, 720 miles of levees, 18 major pumping stations, and 250 control structures . . . a computer-controlled watershed.” And writers like Bill McKibben and Jennifer Price underscore that the myth of pristine nature as a “place apart” in the twenty-first century rings hollow almost everywhere. My slow drive the next morning along an elevated ribbon of pavement from Royal Palm to Flamingo reinforced the realization that humans dictate what passes for nature in the Everglades. Tourists short on time can even book a helicopter and “experience” these million plus acres in a single afternoon.

At Eco Pond, a man-made reservoir on the way to Flamingo, spindly legged herons teetered in treetops, snow-white egrets covered every low branch, and roseate spoonbills, feathered an ethereal cloud-bank pink, stitched across the shallows at the water’s edge. Scores of birdwatchers huddled along the road,