

Review: Seeking Refuge: Birds and Landscapes of the Pacific Flyway

By Robert M. Wilson

Reviewed by Ryder W. Miller

Wilson, Robert M. *Seeking Refuge: Birds and Landscapes of the Pacific Flyway*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2010. 245pp. ISBN 9780295990026. US\$35.00, hardback. Alkaline paper.

Robert M. Wilson, Assistant Professor of Geography at Syracuse University, takes an urban and rural ecological perspective in documenting the history of the United States' Fish & Wildlife Service's interest in protecting waterfowl along the Pacific Flyway. The history presented focuses on the need for water by migrating birds as well as farmers, duck pool managers, Native Americans, and municipalities.

Here one will find an avian story intertwined with the human story of communities which competed for water and sometimes habitat. The story of waterfowl, like urban birds, is different than efforts to protect wild birds in remote and wild places. Wilson seeks to "place the birds and the habitats they use at the center of analysis rather than a particular group of people" (p.12).

The book chronicles the efforts to create a wildlife refuge system to protect these birds despite the onslaught from urbanization and agriculture. It is an unusual tale where hunters helped obtain "wild" areas where they could practice their avocation. Wilson also does not hide his criticisms of federal agencies and also voices criticisms those who have been hurt economically by environmental actions, mostly the farmers.

The work gains further legitimization from a brilliant introduction by William Cronin who motivates us to see the connections between humankind and wild animals, in the process arguing like others that there isn't any or much "pristine" left, and that humans are a part of nature. But that is not an environmental value that we can leave behind despite tales like this. It is hard not to think of this migrating assemblage of birds as a wild space (as Cronin suggests) despite how thoroughly they have been managed.

Though presented as a book about birds, the main body of the work focuses on the battle for water in the west, namely in California, including stories about the Imperial Valley, the Central Valley, the Salton Sea, and the Klamath Basin (which is shared with Oregon). The book also mainly concerns the actions of the Fish & Wildlife Service which struggled to protect areas for waterfowl, but did not have the clout of the National Park Service or U.S. Forestry Department.

It is a dense story that Wilson weaves. Though repetitive, the historical trends are memorably told in easy to follow language. Sadly missing is more information about the biology of the many birds that take flight between Alaska and Mexico, usually stopping along their way in marshes and wetlands in California. Included are interesting drawings, maps, and photographs, which help give the reader a better sense of boundaries of the wildlife refuges.

This book would be of interest to those who seek a deeper knowledge about their connection with migrating birds. This work also is centrally focused on the battle for water and would be of use to those interested in the subject. The story is also primarily a California story or California's part of the story. Though academic in focus, there is not a lot of jargon that would throw off the generalist reader. The work would serve specialized academic courses with focuses on birds, Western environmental history,

California, the Fish and Wildlife Department, and the Bureau of Land Management. Ornithologists and/or those who have been transfixed by migrating birds are likely to appreciate the efforts made here. It is not that the subject matter is too advanced, but this book is not likely to fall under the scope of an introductory book about birds. It is also not a work that focuses on preservation. The average bird lover, especially from the west, is likely to be grateful for having access to this history.

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