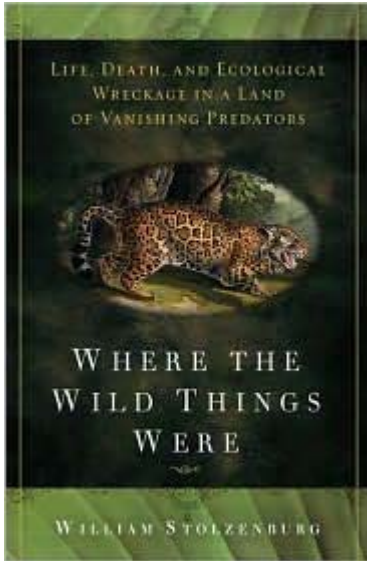


Wild Things, You Make My Heart Sing

Christopher Spatz



During the past year, Japanese stilt grass, an invasive species first introduced to Tennessee, has crept down stream corridors and road shoulders from the Shawangunk Ridge, filling the bed of the derelict canal behind the house, working its way up the bank and into our yard. Stilt grass represents everything that is wrong with eastern ecosystems. Forests that have famously regenerated in the last century are now being reduced to a monoculture of weeds and invasives increasingly bereft of bird-song. From Maine to Georgia and west to the Mississippi, forest succession is under siege, a vast, living graveyard producing embattled heirs, cropped in the bud by a plague of white-tailed deer, overrun with bird-decimating raccoons, opossums, and housecats.

In *Where the Wild Things Were*, science writer Will Stolzenburg stacks the evidence that what Appalachian forests, California chaparral, Amazon canopies – anywhere across the globe you care to look – are suffering from is an absence of big carnivores. Where these keystone predators aren't, smaller predators and herbivores rule, ground-nesting birds vanish, and forests can't regenerate. What my backyard ridge in southern New York State is critically missing are wolves and cougars.

Wild Things stretches to book-length a chapter surveying the evolution of ecology studies, and then some, covered in David Quammen's 2003 opus on alpha predators, *Monster of God*. 1930s Russian test-tubes pitting paramecia against bacteria-imbibing protozoa; Robert Paine hurling starfish off the Olympic Peninsula, triggering a march of mollusks and a retreat of species in the inter-tidal zone; re-colonizing otters salvaging sea urchin-ravaged Aleutian kelp beds; leaf-cutting ants toppling nascent island jungles leaking predators behind a Venezuelan hydroelectric dam – a dynamic John Terborg comes home to find hauntingly re-enacted in the deer, tick, and stilt grass-infested woods of his boyhood haunts outside Washington, DC.

In prose lithe and agile as a voling coyote, Stolzenburg chronicles the charm of monotonous field-censuses turning theory into insights, insights into facts; the people, prey, and predators that have given us terms like *green world*, *food webs*, *trophic cascades*, and *keystone species*. Here, too, is a guano oasis on the Arctic rock of Spitsbergen launching modern ecology studies, Aldo Leopold and the Kaibab Plateau revisited, Hairston, Smith and Slobodkin (HSS), the case of an African hominid murder cracked by a crowned eagle scalping, famished killer whales suddenly crashing the sea otter celebrations, Clovis man-induced exterminations and the mother of all theoretical restorations, a North American Pleistocene rewilding featuring cheetahs, camels, and Asian elephants. Those of us arm-chaired on the ecology sidelines have likely gotten wind that it all culminates in the watershed covenant of the field, *Wild Things'* denouement, the *landscape of fear*.

More important than direct predation, the presence of big predators roaming the land affects prey behavior, of where and how herbivores browse. The transplanted wolves of Yellowstone and the remnant lions of Zion – species long hunted and hounded as demon vermin – emerge as the engines of ecological balance, making obsolescent ungulates run again for a living. Where the wild things are, aspen, willow, and wildflowers, beaver, fish and frogs, birds and butterflies revive. Vilified alpha predators are the archangels of ecosystem restoration.

Critics have noted that a number of worthy researchers have been overlooked by Stolzenburg, and that the very source of the *landscape of fear's* origin cited in the book is suspect. What this layman has noticed is that there's no coincidence *Wild Things* shares many of *Monster of God's* subjects. On dovetailing missions, two of our finest ecology interpreters (Stolzenburg is every bit the rabid archivist and pithy stylist as Quammen, the reigning champ of American outdoor literature) writing for the rest of us have tapped the pantheon of landmark research in the fields of ecology and conservation biology. *Wild Things's* gargantuan bibliography credits those left out in a text of 218 pages. To the latter charge, ECF members will be treated to a first-hand account of the *landscape of fear's* genesis by our newest and welcomed scientific advisor, John Laundré, in our next newsletter.

A Shawangunk land stewardship committee I have the privilege to participate in has been sweating our loss of chestnut oaks and warblers, our invasions of purple loose strife and Japanese stilt grass. The answer: increasing the local deer harvest. But as *Wild Things* exasperatingly illustrates, sport hunting only works for a season. The remaining herd is free to dine un-pressured the rest of the year, and can re-double fast as rabbits. The muscle needed to reduce the East's herds will require a monumental, inter-agency, inter-state effort, to say nothing of selling that one to hunters whose license fees and gear taxes are the cash cows funding state wildlife programs. White-tailed deer are our blessing and our curse, and ultimately, they're not the problem. We are.

The high-minded notion by well-meaning easterners (me included) of returning wolves and cougars to our forests, that they deserve to be restored by birthright to their former range, is preciously dated. And wildlife managers need to be jolted with a dose of stiff science. And wildlife managers need a jolt of stiff science. Alpha predator recovery is no longer a matter of redemption; it is an ecological imperative. The East's forests are dying without them. For my part, I'll start by recommending *Where The Wild Things Were* to the stewardship committee, and to anyone else willing to listen. **Stolzenburg, William. 2008. *Where the Wild Things Were: Life, Death and Ecological Wreckage in a Land of Vanishing Predators*. New York; Bloomsbury. 291 pp.**

FLORIDA: WANTED—A TIMELINE FOR REINTRODUCTION

Stephen Williams, President, Florida Panther Society

Although roadkills of Florida panthers have been periodically reported by the media over the past few years, and conflicts between homeowners and panthers have surfaced, little actual progress in protecting panther habitat and assuring their continued survival was announced until this past summer. The following comments were given during an interview with Board members of ECF and are offered in response in the order in which the questions were asked. —Editor

The final draft of the 3rd Revision of the Florida panther recovery plan was submitted in late 2005 and sent by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) Naples office to Dr. Sam Hamilton in the USFWS Atlanta office. Chris Belden was the lead USFWS person in the development of the plan. Until July 2008 there had been little progress in the finalization and approval of the plan. In mid-May of this year, Dr. Hamilton addressed some questions to the Naples office, and as of July 25th the Naples office had indicated that they had responded to the questions of the Atlanta office. The plan will be finalized and approved when this process is complete and Dr. Hamilton signs the plan.

The USFWS anticipates reintroducing panthers into three areas outside of southern Florida. Their goal is to bring the combined total panther population up to at least 240 cats per population. Associated