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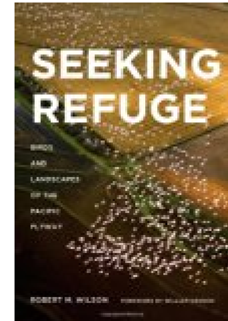
Robert M. Wilson. *Seeking Refuge: Birds and Landscapes of the Pacific Flyway.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010. xvi + 245 pp. Illustrations. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-295-99002-6.



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Published on H-Environment (May, 2013)
Commissioned by David T. Benac

The flyway as a birdy trope has dramatically changed political boundaries related to birds in the past few years. For example, the California Audubon Society's work is no longer organized around the specific geopolitical boundaries of the state, but is now attuned to the routes that birds actually take. This changes the emphasis from us to them, and it seems appropriate and even overdue.

Tellingly, the term "flyway" seems to have been first used by Theodore S. Van Dyke in 1891 by *Outing* magazine to describe part of the area under discussion in this book–the San Diego Bay region, through which the Pacific flyway passes as it rises from central Mexico. "But a few years ago San Diego Bay was gay with life as we rowed across it to the mouth of the Spanish Bight, which was then a favorite 'fly way' " for birds, he noted.[1]

The thrust of this book is about the conflicting legacies of the political entities–but especially the U.S. Bureau of Biological Survey and then the successor U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service–in management of irrigated land that directly influenced the birds' routes, survival strategies, and in more generally maintaining the Pacific Flyway–one of four national flyways–among and across these irrigated spaces. The story is complex, in part because conditions affecting the vital through-routes for birds were affected both by political action and naturally changing conditions. by the 1930s, the Biological Survey had gone from being a patchwork agency that provided relatively little support to the continental western United States, to a more robust and truly national agency that shepherded dozens of new refuges as part of its mission. Hunting regulations became more restrictive, which in turn limited the number of waterfowl killed. Countering these gains, however, farmers continued to drain wetlands for agricultural purposes, often with no regulation. Drought also caused additional problems and depleted water sources along the flyways.

The Biological Survey often acted with noble intentions, as well as with clever approaches to problems. Jay "Ding" Darling, an appointee of Franklin D. Roosevelt, was the head of the bureau in the 1930s, and worked creatively to find solutions to his conservation goals. It was through his efforts, for instance, that the sales from U.S. hunting duck stamps were used to buy land for refuges. Darling's colorful life outside of conservation is not revealed in the book; he won a pair of Pulitzer Prizes for his editorial cartooning work as a journalist.

Quotidian details like these are difficult to come by in Wilson's book, but that's not what he's after here. His task is a considerable one: the untangling of the skein of conflicting interests and activities. Not all bird activities were desirable. Because they need to eat, they often eat what is most readily at hand: domesticated agricultural crops. Pressure from farmers, especially in the postwar years, reduced the size of refuges distributed throughout the Klamath Basin, Central Valley, and Imperial Valley–refuges that were spread across both public and private land. Perhaps paradoxically, the duck stamps promoted hunting, while at the same time ostensibly providing habitat for ducks and other waterfowl. Refuge managers also had their own ideas about the roles of refuges along the flyway. Game birds were their primary interest, which left other species unattended and unsupported, such as egrets, herons, red-winged blackbirds, and a variety of non-avian species. As Wilson

notes, "what was good for waterfowl was not necessarily good for other species" (p. 131). Rural people also suffered as a result of otherwise well-intentioned conservation initiatives, such as the Klamath tribes' and the Yurok Indians' considerable loss of access to water and fish.

The politics at play are confounding. In some ways, there is a significant nesting problem at work here: not a feathered one, but rather, the location of the Fish and Wildlife Service and its attempts to operate within the more powerful and influential U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's sphere. The Fish and Wildlife Service's efforts to support the Pacific Flyway have often seemed philosophically at odds with the Reclamation Service's efforts, which have in turn been almost comically disastrous. The Central Valley Project (CVP), for instance, as managed by the Bureau, was intended to regulate and store water in the northern half of California, and transport it to the relatively water-poor San Joaquin Valley to the south, thus regularizing the state's water supply. Salmon populations in major rivers have declined, a number of natural river environments have been degraded or disappeared, and a number of archaeological sites have been submerged under CVP reservoirs.

More than anything else, Wilson dramatically illustrates the interconnectedness of the flyways' worlds: people, places, and animals whose respective fortunes seem to have been almost irresistibly intertwined. Changing one component in a landscape almost inevitably elevates or lowers the opportunities or status of another component, and the interdependence of these worlds is what comes across most vividly in this compelling and important book.

Note

[1]. T. S. Van Dyke, "The Black Brant at Home," *Outing* 19 (December 1891): 222.

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Citation: Dan Lewis. Review of Wilson, Robert M., *Seeking Refuge: Birds and Landscapes of the Pacific Flyway.* H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. May, 2013.

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