CONSERVATION

Storied rarities

Emma Marris applauds a clear-eyed look at our coy relationship with endangered animals.

When extinction looms, conservation biologists tackle the problem by studying the threatened species. What is the number of extant individuals? The diversity of the gene pool? The nature of the threats to its habitat?

Journalist Jon Mooallem takes a different tack. He pores over the stories people tell about the species. Is the polar bear, for example, a “bloodthirsty man-killer”, a “delicate, drowning victim”, a “cog in a Darwinian machine” or a “menacing and capable agent of its own fate”? The thesis of *Wild Ones* is that these narratives are ultimately more important for species survival than any data, management plan or science, because they determine how hard society is willing to work to keep a species going — as he puts it, “the bear is dependent on the stories we tell about it”.

Mooallem talks to people on the front lines of such creatures’ conservation. He profiles polar-bear activists who tell stories about the bear to encourage action on climate change; scientists who study the Lange’s metalmark butterfly, now wholly reliant on a single managed habitat; and the people working to establish new migratory populations of whooping cranes by leading the birds through the sky in ultralight aircraft. Along the way, he tells other tales of the “surreal kind of performance art” that the management of wild animals has become in North America, from vaccinating ferrets to monitoring pygmy rabbits with drones and equipping red wolves with collars that can administer remote-activated sedative injections should they wander too far.

Mooallem does not come to any hard

Wild Ones: A Sometimes Dismaying, Weirdly Reassuring Story About Looking at People Looking at Animals in America

JON MOOALLEM
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times emotionally wounded and needy.

A scientist going through a tough divorce throws herself into her captive-breeding work and comes to identify herself with the endangered Palos Verdes blue butterfly “as two kindred underdogs, spurned but battling their way out of a corner”. A single father turns to working with whooping cranes in an effort to connect with his son — only to have this work take over much of his life. “I ran away to be a bird guy and wound up being a shitty father,” he says. Of his son, he adds, “now he’s in college and he doesn’t even answer the phone half the time I call”.

The massive impact that humans have had on Earth means that many species are hanging on by a thread. Some could be saved easily — if the political will can be summoned to protect or restore large areas of their

conclusions about how species preservation ought to proceed. Instead, he uses these reports to probe our emotions about the animals and our relationships with them. His conclusion is that, for the scientists and volunteers working directly with species in conservation projects, emotions are highly motivating and often complex. The people Mooallem profiles are selfless, hardworking, moral — and some-

habitat. Others will have a harder time persisting in a world increasingly dominated by human activities. Mooallem explains that for these “conservation-reliant” species, including the three showcased here, human intervention will be required indefinitely.

For many, this is a bitter pill. We want to preserve the species, its genetic diversity and its ecological relationships. But we also want to preserve its dignity, its wildness, its indifference to us. We are chasing “an infinitely receding Eden”, Mooallem writes — an aesthetic experience in which animals live in a place worthy of their nobility, with us a distant, reverent audience. We get squeamish when constant interventions to maintain species seem to diminish their wildness — for instance, by integrating them too intimately into the human landscape. Mooallem cites American crocodiles flourishing in the cooling canals of a nuclear power plant in Florida, and cranes hanging out in “a retention pond near a Walmart”.

Wild Ones chronicles the emotional agony of preserving the animal, only to destroy its wildness. I found many of its stories disquieting. But I think it is important to remember that these emotions are our baggage, not the animals’. Endangered plovers, pupfish and picture-wing flies know nothing of dignity. But they can know death. ■

Emma Marris is a writer and the author of *Rambunctious Garden: Saving Nature in a Post-Wild World*.
e-mail: e.marris@gmail.com

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