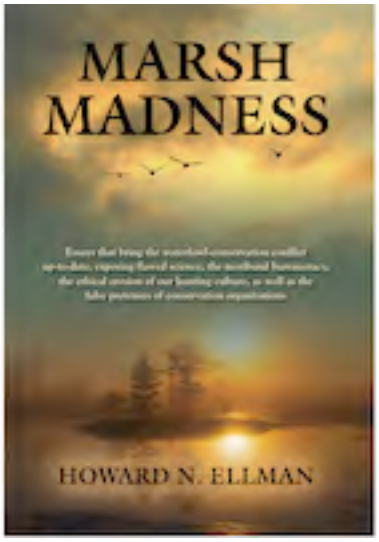
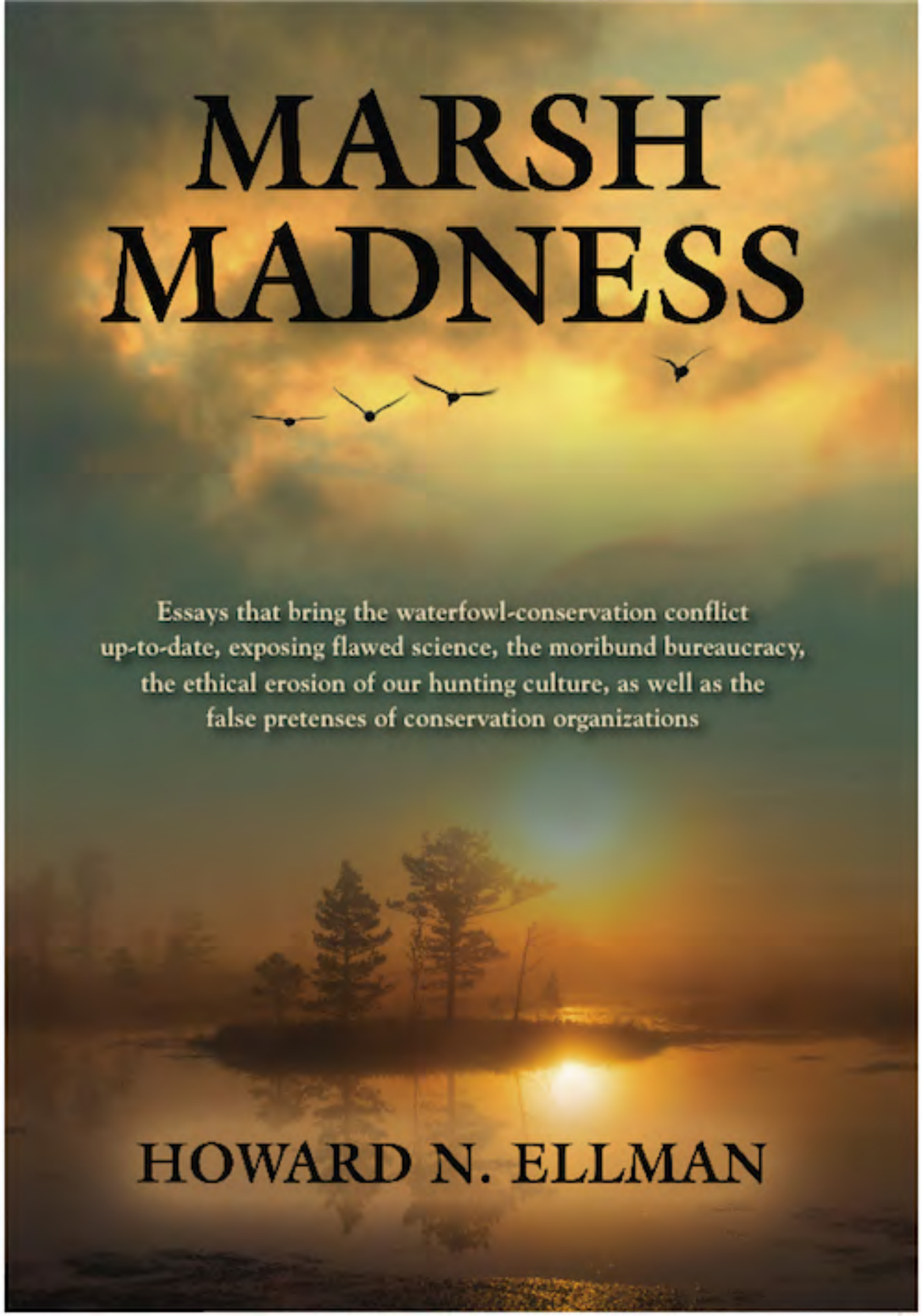



*Essays on the ethical erosion of our hunting culture.*

# MARSH MADNESS

by HOWARD N. ELLMAN


MARSH
MADNESS
Essays that bring the waterfowl-conservation conflict
up-to-date, exposing flawed science, the moribund bureaucracy,
the ethical erosion of our hunting culture, as well as the
false pretenses of conservation organizations
HOWARD N. ELLMAN

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# Contents

# PARADOX

KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE DO NOT ALWAYS COMBINE to yield answers. Sometimes they expose knotty questions that previously lurked behind a curtain of false certainty.

I took up fly-fishing seriously in the early ‘60s. Through business connections, I met a man I will call Ron, a skilled fly fisherman and waterfowl hunter. We started fishing together, he as mentor and I as clumsy student. He was an expert, a gifted and versatile caster, a fly tier of renown and, above all, a master of stream craft.

Ron sought out difficult water that held the promise of big fish. He didn’t mind competition because he regularly out fished everybody, with maddeningly less effort. The incident I am about to relate took place early in our relationship at one of this favorite spots, the last two hundred yards of Rising River, from the fence line of the private ground down to the forebay of a powerhouse, where the power company captured the River in its pipes and turbines while dropping it into Hat Creek a few hundred feet below. This stretch ran through a public campground, next to a general store, hardly a secret, secluded spot.

True to its name, Rising River emerges from an underground lava tube in full flow, gin clear and pure before meandering through a few miles of grassy meadow. Constant flow, cold and stable water temperature at all times of the year, fertile soil and temperate elevation made it a natural hatchery for trout, both rainbows and browns. The stream was large enough and deep enough to support numbers of lunkers, thriving on the bug and crustacean life in its weed beds. From the spring at the source to the fence at the power company campground, private owners jealously guarded the River and its fishery, protecting it from destructive pressure.

Because both of us suffered the inconvenience of steady jobs, Ron and I usually could not take off for the River until about 7:00 p.m. on Friday nights, hoping that most of the traffic would have

cleared by then. It took six hours to get there under the best of circumstances in those days, before the I-505 and I-5 freeways. On the night in question, we hit the campground at 2:00 a.m.; and I hit the River at first light, no more than three hours later.

As was typical of him, Ron didn't begin to stir until about 9:00. He cooked himself a leisurely camp breakfast of eggs, bacon, toast and coffee, not making his first move toward the River until close to 10:00. By that time, the sun was full up in a cloudless sky. The day threatened to become downright hot, and I had had nothing but a single strike from a small trout, despite what appeared to be a moderate PMD hatch with a steady output of emergers. The few other fishermen who had been working the River early had all given up in frustration.

Ron smiled at my efforts, made a few less than helpful comments, but mostly stood watching the stream. I in turn stopped to watch him. Without fuss, he withdrew a small telescope from a vest pocket and began to study a patch of water. He beckoned me to join him. When I stood close, he used his rod to point to a large weed bed, a good 70 feet away. The trailing ends of the aquatic plants pulsed languidly in the current over a dark hole, obviously deep as well as shaded from the rising sun. The waving ends of the grasses agitated the surface gently, just one of several weed beds that rose to the surface of the River.

"Watch the slick over that hole," he said. I saw a few dimples, appearing irregularly. To me, it looked like the surface disturbances caused by the weed bed, nothing more. The sequence wasn't quite right for simple rhythmic action of moving water over aquatic vegetation, not regular enough, especially in such a lazy stream, interesting, but totally academic as far as I was concerned. That spot lay well beyond my casting range.

I watched as Ron tied on a tiny black-bodied spinner, size 20 with a 6x tippet, 14 feet of leader. "Look closely, man. You can see those little clouds of spinners hovering over the tops of the weed patches. I think that's what that fish is taking." I hadn't noticed. I

wasn't even convinced that a fish was there, let alone one worthy of the effort the cast would demand. Those dimples did not announce the presence of anything large. Indeed, a minnow could have made them. Another lesson learned.

With his fly tied to the terminal tackle Ron had meticulously stretched, he shook out line and began false casting. Soon, seventy feet of line flew in tight loops, perfectly controlled. The first cast fluttered down about three feet short. It was a current test. The intermittent weed beds retarded the current, with faster water movement in the spaces between to compensate for the variations. Ron dropped the fly outside the strike zone to help gauge the water movement without dragging over the lie. Again, I hadn't noticed the current variation or the challenge it presented for a proper presentation.

Ron waited until the fly had drifted well downstream of the strike zone before picking up. He false cast several times at an oblique angle to shake the water droplets off the line away from the surface over the trout. When the line had dried, he made the second cast perfectly to the trailing edge of the weeds at the head of the darkness. The trout rose to a natural about a foot away. Ron's tiny fly drifted through unscathed. Undeterred, he again picked up and false cast at a forty-five degree angle downstream until the line stopped shedding water droplets and made his third cast, allowing the fly to flutter down gently, slightly higher on the weed bed. The fly drifted free only to disappear into a subtle surface crease that materialized over the darkest part of the hole.

Ron set the hook gently. As if by magic, a beast of a trout showed clearly in that dark water, violently shaking its head, creating bathtub sized swirls before diving to run fiercely upstream.

It took Ron a full forty-five minutes to bring that fish to net. He claimed that luck played a large part, given the size of the fish, the lightness of his leader and the obstructions in the stream. He had the fish out of the water no more than five seconds while he weighed the net with the trout in it, (seven pounds, three ounces, after deducting

the weight of the net, a brown trout female in brilliant color, fat and in great shape). Ron removed his barbless hook with a forceps and released the fish after gently reviving it. We watched as it swam slowly away, to take cover deep in the nearest weed bed.

I observed this entire episode in slack-jawed amazement, particularly the endgame. In those days, I would have had a trout like that dead on the bank and en route to the taxidermist in less than a minute. Most men I knew would have done the same. Ron greeted my observation to that effect with lofty contempt. "That's a brood female, you idiot. She probably puts out five thousand eggs every fall. She's obviously a success story or she wouldn't have survived to get so big. Fish like her represent the future of the river system, including Hat Creek and Pit River below here. Why would anyone kill a fish like that?" Who could argue? And yet, who had the discipline and the restraint? Where did one learn it, I wondered?

I fished regularly with Ron for more than fifteen years. In all that time, I saw him kill two fish, a Northern Pike and a Sockeye Salmon, both in Alaska and both for camp meat. I watched him return countless trophy fish to the water and lecture in unkind terms those who questioned his behavior. If Roderick Haig Brown was correct in his recitation of the fly-fishing world's record for Sockeye and Coho caught on a fly, I watched Ron return several world record fish to various Alaskan streams without the slightest hesitation or thought of claiming ownership of a new one. And he treated fish he released with great care, brutally berating those fisherman he considered too rough or too hurried in that exercise. He advocated barbless hooks long before they became common for the express purpose of facilitating gentle release, tying all his flies on the lightest barb-free hooks suitable to pattern.

You may well ask, why do I write this for a waterfowl essay? It's because Ron was a total killer in the duck marsh. We hunted together on occasion over a period of several years and he routinely ignored the limit whenever he had the opportunity. Worse, his circle of regular hunting friends included several men even more bloody-

minded than he was, men who took a catch and release approach in their pursuit of trout and yet showed no restraint or discipline in the blind whatsoever. Their ethic of the trout stream had no carry over to the marsh. Indeed, they adopted a polar opposite approach, a total absence of stewardship impulse with shotgun in hand and decoys on the water.

Over the years, I have observed this phenomenon often, finding it increasingly difficult to comprehend, another manifestation of complex ambiguity that pervades the human condition.

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Members of the duck club and their guests lounged around the domino tables after dinner, drinking brandy, smoking cigars, engaged in the type of conversation typical of the night before the hunt. Friday evening at a fine old club in the Butte Sink during the peak of the season, where I had lucked into a shooting membership while at least twenty years junior to the youngest proprietary member.

A Valley farmer I will call Herb was one of the senior members of the club, a twenty-five year veteran. Herb knew how to hunt ducks. An expert caller, he never used anything heavier than a 28-gauge and almost always came in with the four or five greenheads that he regarded as a limit. He had an issue; however. Cripples were his issue, cripples that others did not retrieve for lack of more than perfunctory effort.

Downed birds presented a challenge at that club. Tight, tree-lined ponds, waist deep water at most of the blinds and dense clumps of round stem bulrush meant that many birds fell in heavy cover, and the setting provided wounded birds with good opportunities to evade recovery. The grounds manager was not a dog man, so he did not set up the blinds with dog ports. Only one or two of the twenty members had a dog anyway. With lots of birds around on most days, many of the hunters simply didn't bother to

chase crips when they could get another shot in a few minutes and perhaps make a clean kill this time. Forty years ago, the skies looked somewhat different than they do today. Profligacy came a bit easier, at a lower cost, or so it seemed.

But not to Herb. That night, disgust had him in its grip and he intended to share it. On the previous shoot day, he had watched while the two guys in the neighboring blind, friends of his and long time club members, had downed over twenty birds to come in with their six bird limits, making no effort at all to recover those that did not hit the pond stone dead. Albeit stark and a bit extreme, the episode was all too typical.

Speaking to no one in particular but in a voice that filled the clubroom, Herb went on a riff: "think what it's like to be a duck, just flyin' around looking for a place to rest for the day. And all of a sudden, you are hit with a searing pain, lose a wing and fall like a stone to crash into the pond or a tree limb or brush. Any of you guys have those nightmares where you feel yourself in free-fall and wake in a sweat?" He surveyed the room innocently before continuing.

"The duck hits the water desperate, digging frantically into the nearest tule thicket and then sits there to die slowly in fear and agony over days or maybe a week, because the asshole who shot him doesn't have the honor to find him and put him out of his misery." Again he paused to survey the room, making eye contact with all, smiling slightly. Then he hammered it home.

"What's wrong with some of you guys anyway? Anyone who doesn't bust his ass to bring in his crips has a serious character defect in my book. Much too much of that around here. We need to change. Starting tomorrow. Not because it's the law, although it is, but because its right and the opposite is wrong, wrong, wrong! What's worse, you all know it. Part of being a hunter is taking responsibility to retrieve everything you drop. If that's a problem for you, then be more careful about your shooting, or sell your membership and take up golf. God knows there's no moral stigma in losing a golf ball."

No one spoke up to him, despite a bit of resentment here and there. What right did he have to cast a moral message over the after-dinner euphoria? Well, he commanded a lot of respect in that crowd; but that didn't particularly matter either. Herb didn't give a damn who he offended. He was right and knew it. I squirmed a bit thinking of some of the crips on recent hunts that I had given a lick and a promise, nothing more. It would not happen again while I held my shooting membership in that club, a real privilege for a young guy.

But I tried to do the right thing in those days for the wrong reason, like a driver who honors Stop signs out of fear of the cop but not the risk of collision. I wanted Herb's respect. I would do what he demanded but to impress him, not out of obligation to the birds or the duty of honor as a hunter. That wouldn't come until many years later.

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Garrison Keillor made one of his priceless recordings a few years back about growing up on a farm in Minnesota. He recalled an incident in his early teen years, at the time of the spring hog slaughter, when he and his cousin started taunting a few pigs that were about to go under the knife for the family sausage supply. They were throwing rocks, making tasteless jokes, doing the things that young thoughtless boys do, when Keillor's uncle, his cousin's father, caught them.

According to Keillor, his uncle administered the worst verbal hiding that he and his cousin ever experienced in their entire lives. As Keillor recounted it, the high-decibel message that accompanied the verbal beat down came through with searing heat. "These are living creatures, about to give their only lives for your sustenance. Show respect for them, but above all, for that fact. Imagine what it would be like if you were one of them pigs, and you will deal with this the way real men should."

This is a complex message, not about becoming a vegetarian or adopting a uniform respect for all life, mosquitoes, skunks, crows and sewer rats included. No, this is a relative of the hunter's kindred reverence for the prey, celebrated by primitive peoples as in the cave paintings in Lascaux, the totems of the Haida, the stone carvings of the Inuit among others. People who have lived close to the earth, directly depending upon the creatures they hunt for their sustenance, have shared these sentiments and perceptions for at least twelve thousand years, transcending time and distance. As they could not have learned from each other, the sentiment must be inherent in our natures at some deep level. As their inheritors, perhaps it is not too much to ask that we seek to cling to at least a particle of their nobility. I have no doubt that if we ever achieved that state, we would be far better stewards than we are today, despite all of our vaunted tools.

Perhaps as children of the modern age we stand too far removed from those days, when humanity did not command the pinnacle of the food chain, when human beings understood the real meaning of the word "prey." Perhaps we reside in a place too far removed from the source of that which sustains us, receiving it as a right in pristine packaging, nicely labeled, with neither blood nor death squeals to make us truly part of the process.

Without demeaning the value of modern convenience, we can lament what we have lost. Were we not more skilled navigators before the invention of the GPS? For all of its wonders, modern science has removed the art from much of life, rendering old skills quaint and anachronistic. Too often, we accept the gain, ignore the cost, and relinquish those capabilities without a struggle.

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A friend of mine described an incident that happened while he was out hunting pheasant. He had brought his two young children, a girl and a boy eight and six years old. They had begged to come, but

quickly lost interest, trailing behind as my friend slowly worked a fence line behind the overweight family dog.

With the kids about a hundred yards or so behind him, a rooster flushed and towered. He shot, crippling it. The gutshot bird labored toward the children, crashing into the field a few feet from them. By the time my friend got back to his kids, the girl had the pheasant in her arms, mistaking its docility for tameness rather than the byproduct of mortal injury.

The problem for my friend was that the kids had given the bird a name, and in that simple gesture, the dying bird had become a *being,* rather than merely a *thing.* Putting it out of its misery became a much more portentous act, an act that placed my friend passionately on the outs with his kids for about six weeks.

As I have tried to come to grips with these issues over the years, becoming more aware and yet more puzzled, I have concluded that somewhere in the gray area between "thinghood" and "beinghood" the answer lurks, dancing just out of reach. We think of the waterfowl population, for example, as an entity in and of itself, not as a collection of individuals that cherish their individual lives in their own way as much as any other living creature, *including ourselves.*

Dogs provide a good analogy. Dogs as a species often symbolize something demeaning or pejorative. "Dog days," "bad as a dog's breakfast," "dog tired," "dogging it," "that date was a dog," and so on. But the individual dog that becomes a member of our family becomes something different: a warm and loyal being that commands our love, our caring concern, and our boon companionship. We shed hot tears on the day when we must put that dog down due to illness or old age.

The line our personal dogs cross is that line between *thinghood* and *beinghood.* However, we consider dogs in general, the one we make a member of our family, becomes a *being* whose feelings matter to us. I submit that that is something wholly within us, with little reflection in the creature to which it applies. We change. The

dog does not. But the change in us renders us far more sensitive to the needs and feelings of the animal.

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Let's get back to the paradox that triggered this unstructured philosophical meander. Why do so many approach fly- fishing for trout within an ethical framework that they do not take to the marsh? Perhaps the answer lies in the nature of the activity itself. The fly fisherman, particularly he or she who plies moving water, must attain a level of quiet, unhurried concentration to be successful. The pulses of the river, the rhythms of the rise, the demands of effective presentation require attention in a form not present in most marsh settings, inherently more amenable to social intercourse during the lulls, more laughin' and scratchin'. The fisherman engages in a more solitary, more outward-turning exercise, involving a strong spiritual connection with natural forces.

Then, a hookup rewards success, inaugurating a one-on-one connection with an *individual fish,* a connection that endures far longer than the "mount, move, shoot, splash" of the kill in the blind.

Despite the distinction, one can see ducks as *individual beings* and gain from that perception, in the manner that Leopold described, the epiphany as he watched the light of life fade from the eyes of the she wolf that he had shot for no better reason than trigger itch (his term) and the thoughtless maxim that forest stewards shoot wolves simply for the sake of the shooting. In those days, wolves (the entity consisting of all of them) were bad. Yet the *beinghood* of that individual female touched and profoundly changed Leopold, producing thoughtful writings from which we all benefit.

I do not advocate that humanity assume a mantle of guilt for its place at the top of the food chain, its technological superiority over lesser beings. But that exalted position demands, I submit, sensitivity to the "beinghood," the feelings and the life impulses of those creatures we consume for our spiritual as well as physical

sustenance. It requires sensitivity and restraint, out of respect for the pyramid of life and the temporal nature of all life.

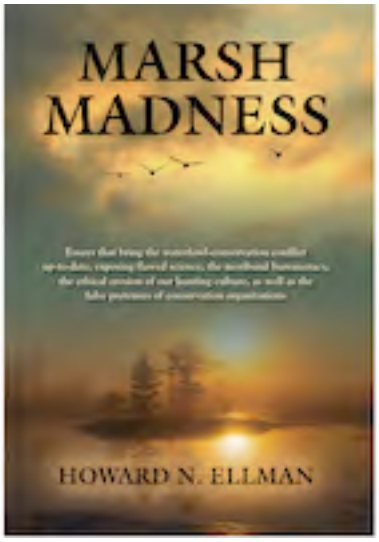
In my younger days, I did a lot of wilderness backpacking, a lot of it solo, all as a devoted disciple of Colin Fletcher, author of The Compleat Walker, Thousand Mile Summer and The Man Who Walked Through Time. Fletcher describes that point in a long trek where the trekker becomes one with the country, with all head noise stilled. He awakes in the morning, composes his kit and loads his pack. As he starts the day's journey, he turns to regard the place where he spent the night under an endless carpet of stars with the thermal breeze sighing gently in the conifers; and there is no sign of his sojourn, his passage—a sublime feeling that, one of the most sublime.

We have a right in the course of our passage, I suppose, to use a small part of the resources of this earth with the respect they deserve, in moderation. Our superiority does not endow us with a license for unlimited plunder. Not moderation for its own sake, but out of a larger sense of respect, Leopold's "pyramid of life" that transcends each of us and will endure long after we have gone. To my eyes, many fly fishermen have imbibed that ethic to a far greater degree than most waterfowl hunters, even when the fisherman and the hunter are one and the same.

We will be better stewards and more well rewarded in the truest sense when we embrace that ethic and learn to apply it in the marsh, regarding each bird as a living entity, complete with joys, fears, feelings and a capacity for pain. The birds, as an entity, will benefit, of course. And we cannot effectively "manage" the "resource" as a collection of individuals, any more than the fishery managers can deal with the fish in that fashion. But the true benefit will come to us, in our level of heightened connection and understanding when we think of the ducks we hunt as individual beings.

Just as Ron could see the pulses of moving water with a profound insight to which most of us who knew him could only aspire, we can seek to deploy that same level of sensitive insight in the marsh, with respect for the individuality of the birds we take.

The goal does not lie out of reach. It is only a matter of resolving to open that channel of awareness.

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