

From the backwoods of central Maine come these observations by an itinerant amateur naturalist on the flora, fauna, weather and weirdness that cycle through the seasons of the great northeast, mostly his home in Waldo County, Maine. These essays, short and long, follow trails blazed by writers like Henry David Thoreau and Annie Dillard to bring the facts of nature into their own peculiar light.

## **The Other End of the Driveway**

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# The Other End of the Driveway

An amateur naturalist's  
observations in the Maine woods



Dana Wilde

## The Other End of the Driveway

*“To follow Dana Wilde is to find one’s self gladly lost and located in the sensorial world with language plain and poetic as the most authentic, curious, Maine neighbor you wish you had.”*

**Patricia Ranzoni,**  
author of *Settling* and *Hibernaculum*

*“Dana Wilde gazes into goldenrod, across a nodding sea of yellow tassels, and on to galaxies blossoming into infinite universe where the way up is the way down. He is a philosopher of nature for whom all the science is there — for fact always bedrocks ‘the sweetest dream’ his labor knows — yet his reaching after knowledge is never irritable, as Keats marks a negative incapability. The essays are utterly charming compositions by field in which an extraordinary imagination opens to mystery and accepts the immensity of Being with fine humor and humility. ‘There is nothing mean in nature,’ Emerson said, and Dana Wilde captures sublimity from the orb-weaver’s quiet design to the wicked glint of Algol.”*

**William Hathaway,**  
author of *Looking into the Heart of Light* and *Sightseer*

*“Dana Wilde’s collection makes up a bright constellation of images and insights that tells the story of Maine’s natural world in all seasons and weather. His close and joyful focus on everything around him, from stars and spiders to bog grasses and bear tracks, instructs and illuminates as all the best stories do.”*

**Kristen Lindquist,**  
Coastal Mountains Land Trust  
and author of “The Natural World”

# **The Other End of the Driveway**

*An Amateur Naturalist's Observations  
in the Maine Woods*

**Dana Wilde**

**2011**

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# CONTENTS

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## PREFACE xi

## Summer 1

- MIDSUMMER IN MAINE 3*
- BLUE WANDERERS 5*
- HUMMINGBIRDS 8*
- NOISELESS AND PATIENT 11*
- A CREATURE FROM NEAR THE BEGINNING OF TIME 14*
- A RAINBOW IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER 17*
- FOOD FOR THOUGHT 20*
- MIDSUMMER FLOWERS 23*
- NIGHT FLIGHT 25*
- OF GOLDENROD AND GALAXIES 28*
- STARS AND FLOWERS 30*
- YELLOW ALCHEMY 33*
- THE SONG OF THE INVISIBLE WHIP-POOR-WILLS 36*
- FELIS CATUS I: SIX HUNDRED MILLION PROBLEMS 38*
- FELIS CATUS II: NAMING CONVENTIONS 42*
- BUTTERFLIES 45*
- WEB WEAVERS 49*
- THE TICKS DON'T CARE 52*
- OUT OF THE HOWLING DARKNESS 54*

*Dana Wilde*

**Fall 57**

*STAR-STRUCK 59*

*ANCIENT PREDATORS 65*

*THE INNER LIFE OF SPIDERS 68*

*NATURE BEYOND THE BOOKS 71*

*THE URGE FOR STAYING 74*

*TIME HURRIES ON 76*

*THE MOST BRILLIANT OF ALL TANGIBLE THINGS 79*

*SEPTEMBER 81*

*OCTOBER LIGHT 84*

*THE PERILS OF POINTING A THOUGHT THROUGH A TELESCOPE 87*

*HALLOWEEN TIME 90*

*LATE NOVEMBER 93*

**Event Horizons 95**

*THE GREAT BEAR IN MAINE 97*

*WEST MEETS EAST: A TALK WITH A BUDDHIST MONK 127*

*THE WOODS AND THE SINGULARITY 132*

*THE DIFFERENT WORLDS OF SCIENCE AND THE BIBLE 136*

*TEACHING THE AMERICAN WEIRDOES 139*

*NIGHT SPEECH 143*

*A WORLD OF WORDS 146*

*INTIMATIONS OF FRACTALITY 149*

*THE PLEROMA 153*

**Winter 175**

*A PLACE WHERE HOUSES ARE ALL CHURCHES AND HAVE SPIRES 177*

*THE JUNE IN JUNIPER 181*

*WHITE CHRISTMASSES 184*

*MAKING SENSE OF WHAT'S OUT THERE 187*

*UNWELCOME WANDERERS 192*

*SHAKE, RATTLE AND ROLL OVER 195*

*WINTER TREES 198*

*FREEZING POINT, AND BEYOND 200*

*THE SNOW GRUMBLER 203*

*WINTER MOONS 206*

*THE IMPLICATE ORDER OF SNOW AND SEED 217*

*THE AMATEUR NATURALISTS 220*

**Wake-up Calls 223**

*AWAKENING FROM WINTER 225*

*AT THE OTHER END OF THE DRIVEWAY 228*

*SPRINGTIME, WHEN AN OLD GUY'S THOUGHTS TURN TO SUMMER 231*

*EVIDENCE OF COLOSSAL THINGS UNSEEN 233*

*HERE COMES EVERYBODY AGAIN 236*

*SPRING SONG 239*

*PASSIVE LANDSCAPING 242*

*THE BLUETS IN THE MIDDLE 245*

*THE INNER LIFE OF TOADS 248*

*COUNTRY MATTERS 251*

*THE WHITE GODDESS 253*



*Dana Wilde*

*WITHIN A BUDDING GROVE 256*

*ON THE LONGEVITY OF SPECIES BY THE NATURAL EXPERIENCE OF TIME 259*

**Author Trivia 263**

## NATURE BEYOND THE BOOKS

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"What's this?" Bonnie said.

She held up a shiny, speckled red ball about the size of an acorn. Me being the amateur naturalist and science fictionist in the house, and everybody else being merely curious, she expected I'd have an answer, or at least a weird guess.

"I have no idea," I said. "Where did you get it?"

"Jack found it in the grass by the Shed."

She handed it to me. It was smooth and looked like some kind of fruit or nut, although it had no apparent stem end. I went outside to look around.

Around the Shed (which outside looks like a run-down tool shed, but inside is a library with wall-to-wall books) are fir, pine, beech, oak, maple, hemlock and cedar trees, none of which drops small round fruits. That I know of. The Shed is attached to the garage, the other side of which are a red-osier dogwood and the carcass of an elm tree that died so suddenly you'd swear it had a heart attack. But they don't grow acorn-sized fruit either. In fourteen years here in Troy, we'd never seen this thing before.

I searched the ground among the acorns. Soon I spotted one of the red fruits and picked it up. Weird. Were they a rare type of acorn? Or maybe they were pods of uncertain origin that would send out tendrils in the night, fasten themselves to our sleeping faces, and clone us into expressionless human-alien

*Dana Wilde*

hybrids that would dispose of our withered bodies in Wednesday's trash.

Maybe not.

Back in the kitchen I got out the tree and flower books and paged through, but found nothing resembling the pods, as we were now calling them. I gave up for the time being and left them on the kitchen table, hoping the tendrils would not be long enough to reach the bedroom.

The next evening, the pods were noticeably drying out. Two days later they were downright shriveled, like oversized raisins. When I went back out to the Shed, where the science fiction novels actually are housed – out of range of those who are merely curious – I picked up five or six more pods and rechecked the tree and flower books – which are kept in the house itself – but still found no resemblances.

Next morning I brought a fresh, shiny one to the office. None of the other amateur botanists could identify it either. When a day later the pod was shriveling, one of my colleagues who knows a lot more biology than me decided to solve the problem before baby creatures with prehistoric teeth started erupting from our chest cavities while we worked.

The truth, as often happens, was one of those disturbing natural phenomena that generate, rather than result from, science fiction. It was not a fruit. It was a growth.

On a table in the office library, we cut the pod open. Inside was a white worm, or more accurately, a larva. The larva, we eventually discovered, was that of a gall wasp, a tiny nonstinging flying insect. The gall wasp laid its egg in an oak leaf and left a chemical that induced the tree to grow this fleshy pod, or gall, around the egg. The larva grew inside the gall and would feed on it. Some galls grow right inside the

acorn, and some, like the ones around the Shed, grow outside and fall out of the trees.

When nature gets an idea, watch out. At least two hundred species of creatures use oak trees to make galls to nurture their young. Some birds and squirrels know they're there, and eat them.

Sometimes it seems uncomfortably like nature has an actual imagination. Nothing seems too weird for it, or too far off the beaten track – unlike most of us who don't stray too far from the house, lest the monsters make us mad.



From the backwoods of central Maine come these observations by an itinerant amateur naturalist on the flora, fauna, weather and weirdness that cycle through the seasons of the great northeast, mostly his home in Waldo County, Maine. These essays, short and long, follow trails blazed by writers like Henry David Thoreau and Annie Dillard to bring the facts of nature into their own peculiar light.

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