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

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 in*capability. 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

ISBN 978-1-61434-245-8

Printed in the United States of America.

All photos in this book were taken by Dana Wilde and Bonnie Woellner, except p. 6 blue jay courtesy of Julia Bayly; p. 64 M31, p. 186 Fomalhaut graphic, p. 207 Europa, p. 210 Callisto, p. 227 Hyperion, and p. 233 coronal ejection on the Sun courtesy of NASA; and p. 25 Altair and p. 211 the Moon courtesy of Anthony Ayiomamitis, www.perseus.gr; back cover photo of author by Jack Wilde.

Cover design by Becky Bowden. Cover painting by anonymous painter of Xi'an, China.

Booklocker.com, Inc.
2011

www.booklocker.com and www.dwildepress.net

CONTENTS

NATURE BEYOND THE BOOKS

"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

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.

The Other End of the Driveway