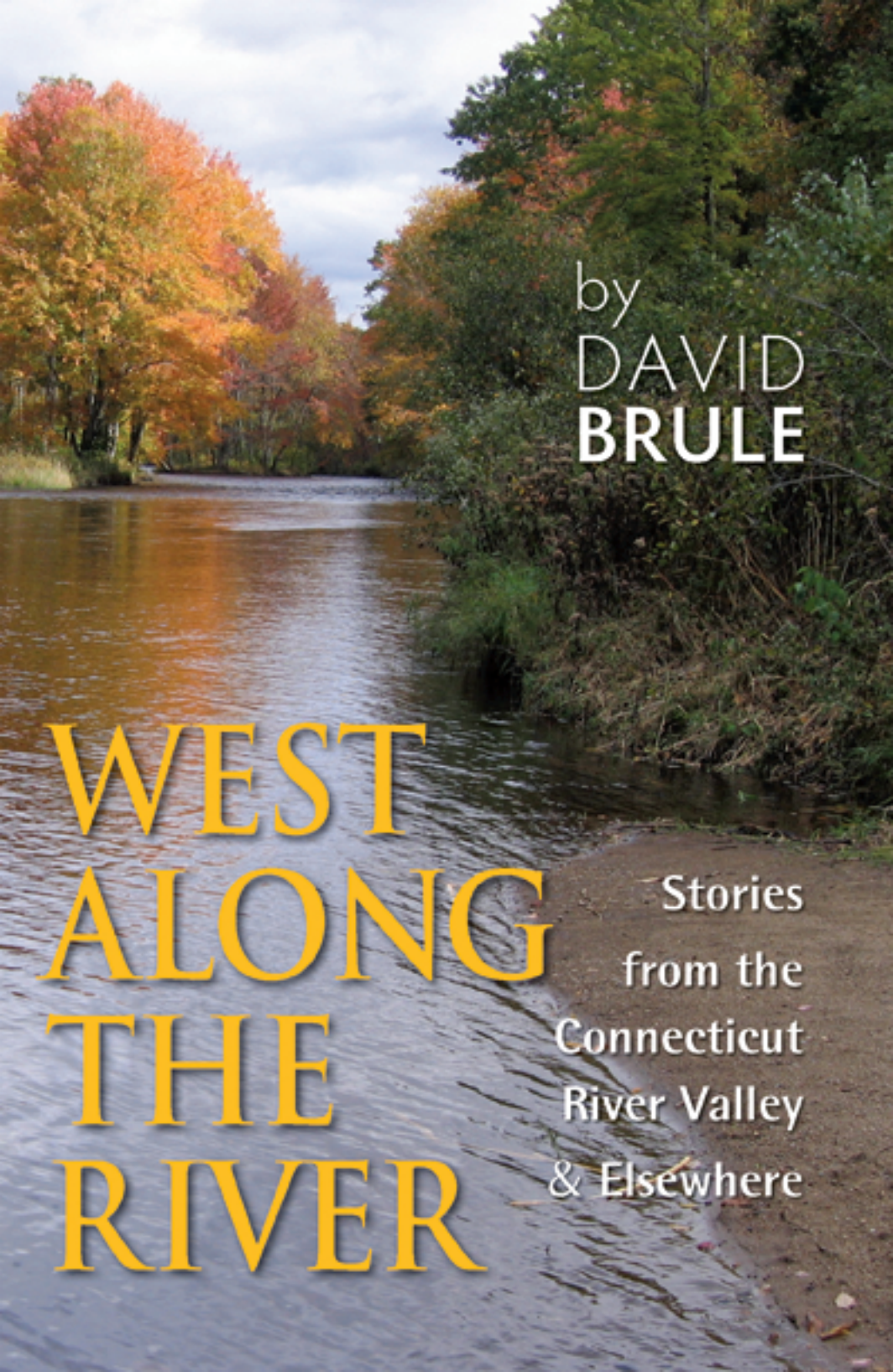
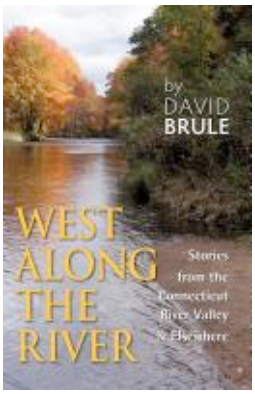

by
DAVID
BRULE
WEST
ALONG
THE
RIVER
Stories
from the
Connecticut
River Valley
& Elsewhere



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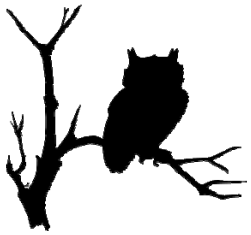

Including
Village Sketchbooks,
And Travel Notes from Ireland,
France, and Brittany

David Brule

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WEST ALONG THE RIVER - 2009

Snow Owl Vision *(January)*

Maybe it all started when, as a 12 year old, I had taken to haunting the frozen river bank of the Connecticut along the place we call the Narrows. In those years, it seems the winters were cold, long, and darker than they are now. And for me in those days, the Connecticut River was the gateway to the Arctic. The river always froze solid, a white expanse of snow and ice, jagged chunks of frozen ridge sticking up from time to time, stretching from the Narrows to the French King Bridge and beyond to the north. Already, by then, I loved being out in the winter when I felt like a solitary explorer on the edge of an ice sheet glacier of a river that extended up to Hudson Bay. Never mind that the geography was a bit off, as I found out later. Daily I scrutinized ice, praying for the appearance of a great white bird to come winging out of the north. I needed to see a Snowy Owl, the very spirit of our northern winter. By the end of those winter afternoons spent exploring the Arctic wasteland just off Carlisle Avenue, I had one advantage that Byrd and Peary never did in their quest for the North Pole. I could trudge home through the snow at dark, and settle into a nice comfortable chair in a cozy home, and read until bedtime when my parents turned off the lights. So much for the intrepid Nordic explorer!

Maybe too the quest became all the more acute when on Christmas Eve in ’57 my grandparents Abe and Hannah gave me a massive book weighing almost ten pounds, one pound for each of my years at the time! The book was called the “Birds of America” by T. Gilbert Pearson, published in 1917. They had bought the book at Wilson’s for the huge sum of $9.95, a dollar a pound by simple calculation, but it sealed my fate as a naturalist, and locked the Snowy Owl and me into mutual destiny. The illustrations were by Louis Agassiz Fuertes, and the 300-page book was filled with narrative and folklore, features that one no longer finds in bird guides, and it linked

me with stories of the Snowy Owl going back to the 1870s. T. Gilbert Pearson had collected the folk names of all the birds, names that would have been lost forever but for his recording of them. He wrote that my owl had other names: Great White Owl, Ermine Owl, Arctic Owl, Harfang, and the name given by Native Americans, *Wapacuthu.* He wrote of the Snowy Owl: "the long days in summer where this owl breeds make its habits chiefly diurnal. This fact has been discovered too late by many a Crow engaged with his brethren in the pleasing diversion of mobbing the big white specter sitting on a limb motionless, and presumably blind, because obviously an owl. For let one of the tormentors come near enough and the ghost suddenly launches out on strong silent wings, the great talons strike and close, and there is a Crow who would have been wiser but for the circumstance that he is very dead." Now that's writing you don't see in bird books anymore! All I knew is that I needed to see a Wapacuthu for myself.

I finally got my first chance years later, around 1978, when I discovered the frozen tundra conditions of Salisbury and Plum Island in February. A hardy group of us, a loose-knit band who formed the now-defunct Norman Bird Club, organized a field trip to the coast in search of winter wildlife. The conditions were Arctic-like, with biting penetrating winds, frozen sea ice, seals, gulls and, Snowy Owls! Finally! We just came upon them, three of them, out on the frozen chaos of an ice-clogged estuary, at home and busy catching voles, mice (and I'm thinking maybe lemmings!). The rest of the day went by in a frozen blur, new life birds turned up but how could we tell? Chilled to the bone, fingers blue and numb, our birds appeared as vague images in shaking binoculars through wind-teared eyes, and they just wouldn't hold still what with the trembling we had from the cold.

Back home that night, after thawing out, I was on the phone rounding up members of the coming Snowy Owl expedition. My immediate family took no convincing, all of us eager to see this fabled bird. Back down to the coast within days we went, and sure enough, the Owls were there, and we watched them to our heart's content, from inside the car. At one point, there came a knock on our

fogged up window and I heard a voice with a slightly British accent, or perhaps a North Shore patrician accent with British undertones, saying, "I say, have you seen the Ross's Gull?" We allowed as we hadn't and asked what to look for. He stated it was an all-white gull with a slightly rosy hue, and was a very special bird indeed. We responded well have you seen the Snowy Owls, feeling the Owls were every bit as impressive as some gull. He stepped back a bit surprised by the intensity and level of enthusiasm and triumph over our owls find. He shrugged and disappeared into the Salisbury wind and we went back to exalting over owls.

Later that week, Time magazine carried an article about the "Ross's Gull Riot" in Newburyport harbor. It seems that the Ross's Gull was a vagrant from the Bering Straits off Alaska, never before seen in the lower 48, and that every half-mad bird life-lister had come from all over the US to see it. Even the great Roger Tory Peterson had hauled himself out of retirement to join the throng in the Newburyport coal yards where by then had formed a true army, bristling with telescopes and cameras, scrutinizing every tawdry mundane sea gull in search of the elegant Ross's.

Even then, we didn't care. We were feeling pretty superior with our owl.

But I was to have one more Snow Owl adventure just a few years ago. I got a call one dark mid-December afternoon from Betty Waidlich who told me there was a large white owl sitting on the rocky point that juts out into the river at Cabot Camp, where the Millers meets the Connecticut. My totem bird had finally come to me and was waiting just a few minutes downriver. And indeed, there he was, sitting upright on the point. He must have winged his way down from the far north, just as I had always imagined, a white specter floating down, passing under the great bridge, and resting now on the promontory. We approached him slowly; he seemed to pay us no mind. We stayed at least fifty yards away, got our fill of snowy owl impressions and turned slowly away to leave him in peace, when, just then, he toppled off the rock and lay motionless on a ridge above the water. We ran up to him in a flash, he was in a deep swoon, with no strength left. I cradled him in my arms, his fierce yellow eyes opened

and looked into mine, his huge black talons gripped my arm briefly, and his white head sagged, giving up the ghost. I was stunned. *Something* had passed between us. From him to me, after a lifetime of waiting. We carried his body reverently back to the car. Later, I called Carolyn Boardman to see what she could tell me. She was the local expert on raptors and the Barton Cove eagles, and a friend. More than likely she said the owl had come down the river, driven south by the lack of food, had probably made it to the confluence, on the point of death by starvation. Nothing more to be said, other than that it was illegal to have this bird in my possession. The ground was by then frozen, and having no alternative, it spent the rest of the winter in the freezer in the kitchen. When spring finally arrived, we buried the owl in the rich earth below the house, along the river, standing up, its great white head facing north.

Old Man Winter's Backside *(February)*

That's what this part of February feels like to some of us. We've reached the mid-point of the month and according to the Old Farmer's Almanac, on the 16th "Winter's back breaks". I'd say not so fast, Abe Weatherwise. I'm not so sure about the back-breaking part, but I know a lot of us would like to plant a boot in winter's backside about now. But we've got to keep up hope, otherwise we couldn't live in this climate. True, the bad weather has held off for a few weeks now, but by the time you're reading this, we could be back in the middle of it. Our customary January Thaw didn't happen until it had to be called a February Thaw, but we'll take it. And it's also true that the sun, hanging around for almost an hour more since early January, has been getting a chance to do its work. Snow banks are becoming sandy eyesores, and our yard is littered with implosions of feathers scattered in small circles, the crime scenes exposed now that some snow has melted. The neighborhood assassin, most likely a sharp-shinned hawk, turned a number of juncos and sparrows into alternative energy to fuel its own hawk's need for winter protein and springtime procreation. We can't really find fault with nature taking its own

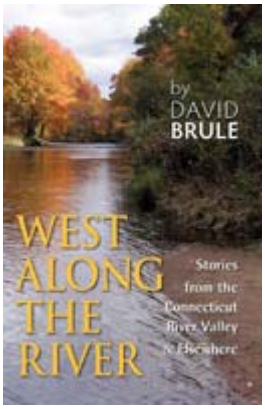
course, but it'd be better for this household if the hawk made off with some starlings instead our sparrows. Meanwhile, up at the farm on Mineral Mountain, the horses doze in the February sun, their huge flanks turned toward the rays, eyes closed sleeping standing up in late winter bliss.

Nature never stands still for long however, and outside the window, the pine siskins mob the thistle feeder, oblivious to the economic situation in our human world. They could care less about the coming Depression or stimulus packages to avert it. The thistle's their bail-out plan, and they bring in occasionally a redpoll cousin to cheer us up. The world's in a strange state with bank failures and foreclosures, fresh budgetary disasters awaiting school systems and town governments. And as if that wasn't enough, our two months of mud season is still a few weeks away. But just as there's a little optimism in Washington, so too can you find springtime hope in the courtship antics of the squirrels following one another nose to tail, the promise of primal squirrel coupling just a few sniffs away. They play and tussle in slow motion on the rail fence and under the rhododendrons, leaves still limp from the cold. Over on the mountain, the horned owls have already set up house-keeping, after a healthy month of hooting along the river and through the woods, staking out their territory. Of the seven cardinals that show up in the yard at dusk, the majority are bright males, jealous of one another already, trying to chase all other rivals from the few females pecking demurely at seeds and not seeming to pay attention to the displays of late winter machismo.

It's reassuring to find the familiar cycle renewing itself. It's all the more sweet following this winter of discontent. Not unlike the venerable local celebrity author of Jep's Place, I also spent time in the hospital. Like Joe P, I had to make the best of it, and try to keep a sense of humor in that strange place. I spent a week in exile up on the 15th floor of Brigham and Women's in Boston, somewhat against my will, but of course for my own good. A charming young nurse, Saundra, kept a watchful eye on me and kept me focused on my recovery. At least I could look out the window night and day at the cityscape of snowy rooftops and busy streets. It felt particularly

unusual for someone like me who is used to looking out the bedroom window at a landscape of flowing river, and birches in the moon shadows. Plus it was like spending a week in Grand Central Station. Whatever happened to the term Hospital Quiet Zone. My ward was a scene of constant 24-hour per day commotion, comings and goings, conversation and confabs in all manner of foreign tongues. I could pick out Persian Farsi, Brazilian Portuguese, several East European languages, and my favorite, Haitian French. Having spent at least half my life speaking French, it was very familiar in that strange place to make small talk with the Haitian nurses, who seemed to be so very natural at care giving. Must be something to do with an island up-bringing.

But it was great to get home and caught up on all the news, especially the news in my little corner of the world. There were robins and waxwings on Avenue A. (And some discussion as to whether they were harbingers of spring or just some robins who decided to tough it out.). A redwing showed up in the yard on Valentine's Day, definitely a spring arrival, almost 10 days ahead of time, and a grackle two days later, also ahead of time. The Red Sox catchers and pitchers were turning up in sunny Florida, while we had the ladybugs here instead, stretching their legs and walking around the sunny kitchen windows. I was eventually able to hobble out into the fresh air, and smell the old snow and the promise of spring on the air. I'd still call this the backside of winter, with all its anatomical connotations, but just now, one of our discreet song sparrows, constant garden companion in summer and winter, has come up to the edge of the deck, looking for stray seeds. And even as he's going about scratching for a February living, his little optimistic song bubbled up in his throat while he worked, whistling like a busy carpenter his cheery tune. Now suddenly, after hearing him tuning up for spring, I feel a whole lot better about this time of year.



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Stories from the Connecticut River Valley and Elsewhere

by David Brule