

Losing and missing a country cat

Our small, tiger-striped cat, Madeleine, hasn't been seen for a week, and we fear the worst. In the year and a half she's lived with us, we have come to appreciate her finer qualities, especially as compared to our cranky, disheveled senior cat, (M)Alice, who has been around forever. Madeleine was not a bright cat, but she was tidy, quirky and affectionate. She had a sweet little meow and a ready purr, and we miss her.

Living in the country as we do, Douglas and I are keenly aware of the natural world around us. The whimsies and vagaries of the changing seasons feel very immediate. The forest encroaches; we do constant battle to keep it from infiltrating the lawns and the field. But it is the animal life that we experience most dramatically.

Although we appreciate and respect the wild creatures who share our small corner of the world, our encounters with them are not always charming. We can cope with an occasional deer in the garden, the raucous crows who wake us before dawn, the extended family of turkeys blocking the driveway and the small platoons of mice nesting in the winter barn. Even the hornworms in the tomatoes — these are all manageable inconveniences. But there are other, more perilous, forces afoot, and signs that nature is taking its sometimes-violent course all around us.

Early one morning, we found a dead skunk just outside the back door, neatly eviscerated and with its head torn off before it had even had a chance to spray. We've seen a hungry coyote trotting along the railroad track and heard a family of them howling in the near distance. Once, in a fresh-fallen snow, we found the clear impress of an owl's wing under the bird feeder; a few feet away the snow had been churned and bloodied in some frantic batte for survival.

But it is the foxes we encounter the most. We sometimes smell them when we're out walking — a sweet, murky scent, something like a skunk but different. We hear them at night, a weird, sharp bark from the wooded hill behind the house and sometimes much closer. And it's not unusual to find scat nearby, often on the driveway, sometimes in the grass right under the living room windows.

Knowing what we do, we would be justified in keeping the cats indoors all the time. Many people do just that, for reasons that include protecting the cats as well as protecting the lives of the wild birds and small rodents they so enjoy stalking.

But, like many country-dwellers, we choose to have indoor/outdoor cats. To us, it seems more natural, more humane to have them out in the world. In addition to happily following us on our neighborhood walks, rolling in the grass and dozing on the warm asphalt of the driveway, the cats make at least a small dent in the mouse population — albeit at the cost of an occasional chipmunk or chickadee, and, once, regrettably, a handsome little red-and-white weasel.

We do bring them in at dark, if they'll come. (M)Alice is always ready, but Madeleine often balks, huddling in the grass under the aluminum boat, skittering away if we try to pick her up and even rejecting the special little treats we offer. Those nights when she just won't succumb to our entreaties, we leave the driveway light on bright, latch open the barn door just wide enough for a small cat, send a little blessing out into the night and go to bed.

We take the same precautions when we're away for a few days — cats out, light on, barn door propped narrowly open, food and water inside. And until last weekend, it worked. But Sunday afternoon when I pulled up the driveway after leaving Thursday evening, only (M)Alice was there to greet me. Inside the barn, the food dish had been hauled across the floor and was, uncharacteristically, completely empty. Some other animal had been in there, and Madeleine was gone without a trace.

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MEG HASKELL



LINDA COAN O'KRESIK | BDN

Amateur naturalist Dana Wilde discusses writing about the vast universe, from the stars in the sky to the spiders in his yard, from the perspective of his home in Troy recently.

A universe in his back yard

Amateur Naturalist writer shares more essays

BY MEG HASKELL
BDN STAFF

On a recent sunny afternoon, Dana Wilde was lying on his stomach in the scrubby grass of his backyard in Troy. He was looking closely at a nearly transparent spiderweb that was smaller than a single sheet of toilet tissue and slung low against the short blades of grass. At one end, it folded into a soft, funnel-shaped shaft.

What spider could have manufactured such a marvel?

"One of the grass spiders," Wilde said without looking up, jostling the web lightly with his finger to see if the shy arachnid would come darting out of its hiding place.

After several minutes, it hadn't, and Wilde slowly stood up. There were other spiders and other webs to look at, all manner of small creatures and insignificant plant life, and all the infinity of outer space to be discovered, right there in the grass and trees and sky behind his house. All he had to do was look.

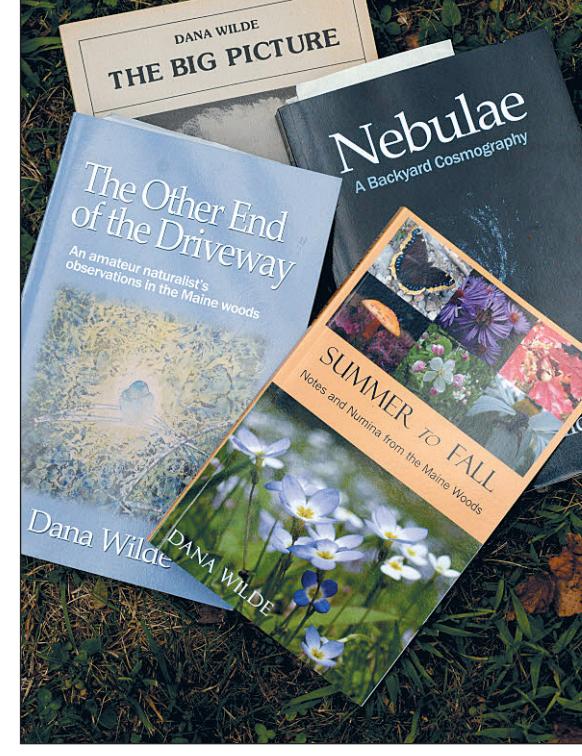
Wilde, 63, has been observing and documenting the world around him, intimately and affectionately, for years. The author of the popular Amateur Naturalist column in the Bangor Daily News from 2005 to 2012, he now writes the bi-weekly Backyard Naturalist column for the Kennebec Journal and Morning Sentinel news outlets. He also is the author of several books, including "The Other End of the Driveway" in 2011, "Nebulae: A Backyard Cosmography" in 2012 and "Summer to Fall: Notes and Numina from the Maine Woods" in 2016.

What does numina mean? It's the plural of the word "numen," which, according to the Webster's New World College Dictionary, refers to a deity or "an indwelling guiding force or spirit." This new book of Wilde's short essays is touched by considerations of inherent divinity, by the possibility of meaning or mysticism in the vast order and disorder of the natural world.

In "Summer to Fall," Wilde writes with equal fascination about the complex structure of a dragonfly's eye, the fatally toxic root of the water hemlock and the amoral hunting behaviors of his two otherwise sociable cats, Panda and Brian. He ponders the apparent loneliness of a solitary purple martin, left behind at the baseball field in nearby Unity when all its compatriots have migrated south. He marvels at the overarching constellations that pass through the open patch in the trees above his driveway and compares their ever-expanding clusters to the flowering umbels of goldenrod and Queen Anne's lace along the roadside.

In a tender essay titled "Cherry May," he allows us a glimpse of his longtime love for Bonnie, his wife of many years: "... the shadblush blossoms in my lexicon stand for the first mid-May my wife and I spent together. That was true madness, it seemed to me then and every spring since, because every pastel green place I looked, I thought I saw her face, especially in the shadblushes. Once you know what to look for, it is suddenly everywhere. I see it still now."

Wilde's notions of divinity in nature don't come from formal religion but rather from a lifetime of wide-ranging reading and studying. In this book, his essays are rich with offhand allusions to writers and philosophers from Socrates to Tolkien, from William Shakespeare, Henry David Thoreau and Emily Dickinson to Jerry Garcia, Tom Rush and Maya Angelou. He references the Sufi mystics, the Old Testament and the rich mythologies of ancient Rome and the aboriginal cultures of the Americas.



LINDA COAN O'KRESIK | BDN
Books written by amateur naturalist Dana Wilde can be seen recently in Troy.

There's plenty of solid natural science here, too, whether he's describing the life cycle of the lowly dog tick, the 600-mile migration of the ruby-throated hummingbird or the slow turnings of the galaxies. Though he cautions that the book "comprises essays, not scholarship," it's evident Wilde has consulted many authorities in assembling this information.

Despite all this erudition, Wilde aims to achieve a natural speaking voice in his writing, a conversational tone with his readers. "The goal is to communicate," he said. "When you read my columns and essays, you should be hearing me talking to you. If you don't, I've failed."

He does not fail.

Finding a life's work

Wilde was born in Ipswich, Massachusetts, but moved with his parents and younger sister to Chebeague Island off Portland when he was 2 years old. Later, twin brothers were born. His father flew a seaplane, spotting schools of herring for the seiners in Casco Bay, and worked on the construction of a power station on nearby Cousins Island.

He graduated from Cape Elizabeth High School in 1971 and studied English at the University of Southern Maine in Portland and Gorham. He didn't finish his bachelor's degree until 1991.

"I'd get sick of going to school and go to work for a while, and then I'd get sick of working and go back to school," he said.

When he wasn't in school, he worked at Tower Publishing in Portland, which published the state business register and the city directory, eventually advancing to the position of managing editor.

"It was mind-numbing," he said.

After a year of graduate school in Orono, Wilde returned to Portland to write and play music. Eventually, he entered the master's degree program in English at SUNY Binghamton, graduating in 1985.

Through his work-study position as a teaching assistant, he said, "I discovered I was a good teacher."

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Esther Rauch

Gala to honor work by educator

Rauch promoted opera, arts in Orono

BY MEG HASKELL
BDN STAFF

In the 1940s, when Esther Rauch was growing up in Mobile, Alabama, a beloved aunt came to visit her every Saturday. Dressed up in their good clothes, the two would step into the quiet parlor, close the door and settle down in front of the Philco radio to listen to a live opera broadcast on the Texaco Radio Theater of the Air.

It was a ritual that gave rise to a lifelong passion.

"I still listen to opera every Saturday afternoon," Rauch said in a recent interview. When she's at home in Glenburn, she primarily listens via Maine Public Broadcasting. Once in a while she attends a live event in New York City or elsewhere.

But 10 times per year, during the performance season of the Collins Center for the Arts at the University of Maine campus in Orono, Rauch and her husband, Chick, can be found in their long-time seats at the rear of the 1,400-seat concert hall, soaking up a live-broadcast production of The Met: Live in HD. And on Sept. 17, at the Collins Center's annual opening gala, Rauch will be honored for her role in promoting the live opera broadcasts and the performing arts overall in Greater Bangor.

Ten years ago, the Metropolitan Opera launched its innovative live-broadcast series, beaming powerful performances from the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York City to local movie theaters and other venues around the country. New theater partners have signed on each year since; The Met: Live in HD now airs in more than 2,000 theaters in 70 nations.

Here in Maine, there are nine venues, including The Waterville Opera House, The Grand Theater in Ellsworth and The Collins Center for the Arts. For about \$25, Mainers can enjoy current Met productions on the big screen, enhanced with detailed onstage closeups, intimate backstage interviews and other enrichments. Some people liken it to watching a pro football game at home — you miss the drama of being in the stadium, but the tradeoff in visual detail, informative analysis and convenience is worth it.

Some opera purists eschew the broadcast experience, but Rauch, who has been an ardent booster of the Collins Center for the Arts since it opened as the Maine Center for the Arts in 1986, has embraced the Met live broadcasts wholeheartedly.

"I have loved live opera all my life," she said. "At the Met [in New York], I spend \$345 for a good seat, because I always want a good seat when I'm there. But here I can spend \$25. I can see everything. I have a comfortable seat. I don't have to get dressed up. I don't have to worry about parking or dinner and snacks."

But despite these attractions, attendance has never been robust at the Orono opera broadcasts. "We generally draw between 100 and 150 people to each show," Collins Center director Danny Williams said. While that would be a substantial audience in a smaller venue, he noted, it is barely a blip in the cavernous space of the Collins Center. "We're always trying to expand and build the audience," he said.

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