



On the road Any American naturalist embarking today on a continental road trip drives in the shadow of 3 great naturalists & one inventive novelist of my parents' and grandparents' generation who are no longer with us—who crisscrossed the country and wrote about it: Peattie (1898-1964), Teale (1899-1980), Peterson (1908-1996) and Steinbeck (1902-1968).¹ On our own drive, Cathy and I also replicated 3 replicators: 2 top-tier naturalists and a Brit sailor of our baby-boomer generation who published books partially about retracing those earlier travels: Weidensaul, Kaufman and Raban.

All 7 of these writers are men, mostly northeasterners who launched from Long Island, or equally urbane homes, from which things get wilder in any direction. I just asked Cathy why no female naturalists seem to have done the roadtrip gig. She pointed out that Peattie and Teale (ps: and Steinbeck dammit!) traveled with their wives, who probably had most of the good ideas and doubtless found the coolest birds and plants. I've no trouble imagining that, as I relied similarly on Cathy's better eyes and ears, too distracted by my cameras and drones and preconceived goals to notice much in my peripheral vision.

1 There's other road-trip classics from the 'originals' era—such as *On the road*, Jack Kerouac, 1951 (1957)—but the drive-to-natural-history ratio in that one's about 100:1. His *Dharma bums*, 1955 (1958), is pitched as a "novel" but actually chronicles adventures with Japhy Ryder (Gary Snyder), and does qualify as a road-&-wilderness trip. Gary was a decent naturalist even in the 1950s, and Kerouac learned from him. *Dharma bums* culminates in fire-spotter hermitage atop Desolation Peak in what became North Cascades National Park. Left there in white-out by a horse packer, he couldn't see anything til morning:

"Lo, in the morning I woke up and it was beautiful blue sunshine sky and I went out in my alpine yard and there it was, everything Japhy said it was, hundreds of miles of pure snow-covered rocks and virgin lakes and high timber, and below, instead of the world a sea of marshmallow clouds flat as a roof and extending miles and miles in every direction, creaming all the valleys, on my 6600-foot pinnacle it was all far below me. I brewed coffee on the stove and came out and warmed my mist-drenched bones in the hot sun of my little woodsteps. I said "Tee tee" to a big furry cony" and he calmly enjoyed a minute with me gazing at the sea of clouds. I made bacon and eggs, hauled wood and identified landmarks with my panoramic and firefinder and named all the magic rocks and clefts, names Japhy had sung to me so often: Jack Mountain, Mount Terror, Mount Fury, Mount Challenger, Mount Despair, Golden Horn, Sourdough, Crater Peak, Ruby, Mount Baker bigger than the world in the western distance, Jackass Mountain, Crooked Thumb Peak, and the fabulous names of the creeks: Three Fools, Cinnamon, Trouble, Lightning and Freezeout. And it was all mine, not another human pair of eyes in the world were looking at this immense cycloramic universe of matter. I had a tremendous sensation of its dreamlikeness which never left me all that summer and in fact grew and grew, especially when I stood on my head to circulate my blood, right on top of the mountain, using a burlap bag for a head mat."

"I suspect Jack's "big furry" co-basker was a **marmot**, to whom he mistakenly applied the nickname for **pika**. But what do you expect from a party-hardy beatnik's one-draft stream-of consciousness?



Car camping in 1925. Annotation by Dad's mom Opal Norwood Carstensen, on left. Photo by my grandad August who owned a view camera. Six-year-old Dad is the small blurry figure with Opal, and the others are my great-grandfolks Loretta and Andrew Norwood. Cheyenne was at least 500 miles from the Carstensen home in Oakdale, Nebraska. I've outlined their probable route on the 1926 highway map, next page. This scene suggests what competent mechanics August and Andrew were, to nurse those cranky old rigs so far over rutted wagon roads. No motels in 1925—the first mo-tel in the world opened that year in California. Filling stations were equally new concepts; the Carstensen-Norwoods probably bought container gas from general stores *en route*.

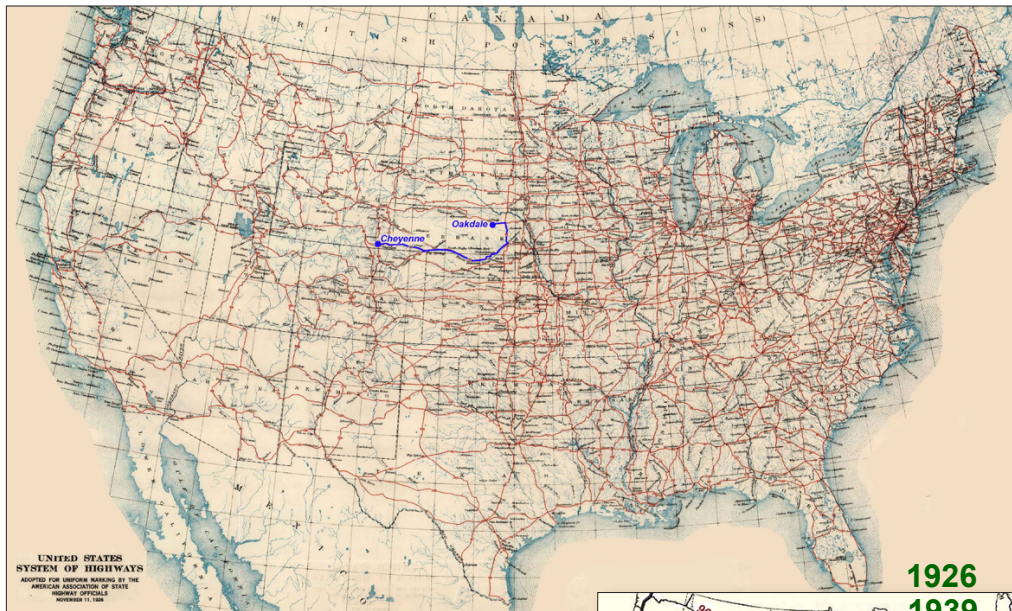
The originals Of course there's nothing fundamentally 'original' about mid-1900s natural history travel writing. Surely the explorer-naturalist's journal goes back to the invention of writing itself. But there's a certain sweep and scale and continental intimacy that comes with the ability to cover 300 miles in a day—that you don't get from naturalists afoot or on horseback. So I'm limiting myself here to the era of paved highways and reasonably trustworthy vehicles that dates roughly to the beginning of WWII. It's worth remembering that these "original" petro-powered nature-writers were themselves retracing the travels of previous explorer-naturalist-chroniclers: Bartram (1765),



Clockwise: Route driven by Horatio Nelson Jackson from California to New York in 1903—the first transcontinental auto trip. Ken Burns created a documentary on this trip called *Horatio's Drive*, which can be streamed on Netflix. Horatio relied heavily on railroads, especially in the west. Many of his river crossings were on railroad trestle bridges. ● State Highways in 1926, with Dad's probable route between Oakdale and Cheyenne marked in blue. ● State routes existing in 1939 that were slated for a Federal Interstate system. Numbers are mine (maybe different then?).

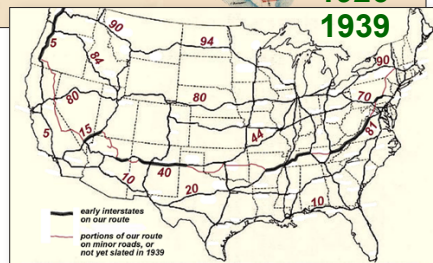
Merriweather Lewis (1804), Nuttall (1810), Audubon (1820s), Parkman (1846), and Clemens (1861-67). Among my "originals," the most explicit road-based retracing was Teale's, whose paved peregrinations intersected those of Nuttall, 150 years earlier, and were each time duly noted.

Donald Culross Peattie *The road of a naturalist* 19?? (1941) For this and the following reviews, I try to give date of journey(s), followed by date of publication; there's always a lag of



at least a couple years. But as with most of the following travel-writers, Peattie rarely pollutes his prose with actual month or even year—something I find frustrating. Surely, as historians themselves, these naturalists appreciated time-specificity in the journals of *their* predecessors.

Peattie takes timelessness to an extreme, considering that travel—last I heard—moves from time A to time B. *Road of a naturalist* flaunts that expectation with non-sequential



flashbacks.² Except for Peattie, who probably enjoyed mystifying us, I suspect date-avoidance was mostly imposed upon the following writers by editors and marketing divisions, always conscious of spoilage, and financial liabilities of old news. Even today, while it's hard to find a book's first-edition date on Amazon, they're happy to name (for awhile) the year of hot-off-the-press re-issues.³

Road of a naturalist was published as World War II loomed. You can sample a few desert chapters from Google Books' [partial archive](#). Of the 4 authors I'm calling *The originals*, Peattie is most poetic—some might feel too self-consciously so:

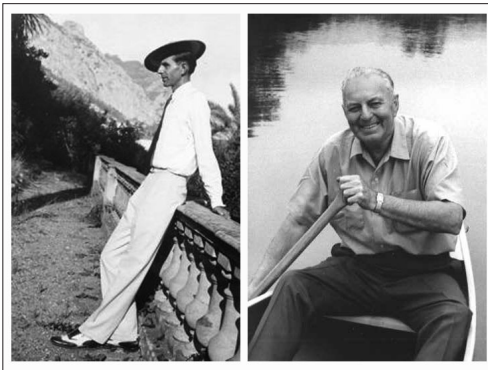
"The car, a flying home enclosing us as man and wife, descended out of the mountain pass in a rush upon a waste on fire with sundown. Unleashed for the long stretch, the motor took up a loyal thrumming. The wind at the lip of the window lifted its coyote whimper that it keeps for the Mojave. This was a strange sunset, even for the desert; dust or clouds had diffused it till it stretched all around the sky. There was no quarter of the earth that was not engulfed in conflagration."

And a passage about childhood in the Smokies:

"And now I knew the mayflower and trillium by name, and the Carolina wren and the cardinal, all the singing birds except the one who sang alone in the rain, lifting

² Sherry Simpson, one of Alaska's best nature writers, who teaches writing at UAA, says it's boring to tell stories in the order they transpired; you inject tension and drama by shaking them up. I'm sure she's correct, and apologize for slavish devotion to chronosequence in my travel journal.

³ My excellent free-lance Mountaineers editor for *Salmon in the trees*, tweaking the description of my Alaska-California-Alaska drive, replaced my draft "In fall, 2001," with "A few years ago." Not only do dates 'go stale,' they're deemed unwriterly. A classic, especially, should be timeless. But for travel-writers this also permits fudging, reversing chronologies, even (gasp) artistic license; most shamelessly in Travels with Charley.



Left: Donald Culross Peattie • Right: Edwin Way Teale

his voice and letting it fall in a long silver whistle. I knew the smell of plants I could not name; I had a small hatchet and made trails in the woods, hacking sweetgum and spice bush and sassafras, sheering their pungent bark so they bled odors that I got by heart. There amid the glittering leaves I stood a long time listening for the thrush to sing again.

Of the 4 "originals," Peattie is probably densest and most 'literary,' and for me most soporific, when insufficiently caffeinated. Publicity photos suggest Peattie was a dandy—clothed commensurately with brandished braidings of botany, buzzard-flight and La Traviata. His graphic passage about hoe-hacking the head off a rattler is hard to stomach, even for an old killer like me. Still less appealing are intimations of racism.⁴ But Peattie was a damned good naturalist, whose learned stanzas make Kerouac's scenery-paintings, 15 years later, seem sophomoric.

Edwin Way Teale *Autumn across America* 1952 (1956) Third in a 4-part series about spring, summer, fall and winter, this was the book most on my mind as we headed south in late October, 2016, in conscious pursuit of autumnal colors fast-fading from our 'second-home' in New York. Comparative phenology of leaf senescence and abscission across the gulf of 64 years between the Teales' trip and ours might have opened interesting windows on climate change. But we only know the start and end dates of *Autumn across America*: the fall equinox and winter solstice of 1952. In between, although he gives plenty of dates for activities of others, and sometimes records the exact minute when he and Nellie crossed a state border (12:05 pm for

⁴ In a thinly veiled description of "lazy" ants. On the other hand, Peattie's grandson remembers he passionately and publicly opposed the internment of Japanese Americans.

North- into South Dakota), there's narry a date for their own adventure. At one point, Teale suggests he's protecting us from time-specificity, because the year of their fall transect was misleadingly late and warm. (I don't buy it; I think it was his editors.)

Autumn across America might have been more germane if we'd left earlier, taking a northern route closer to Ed and Nellie's (dot-dash-dot red line on map). As it turned out, our 'confederate route' (green line) intersected *North with spring* (dotted red line) along the spine of the Appalachians, and *Wandering through winter* (solid red line) at quite a few points in the central and southwestern states.

On return to Juneau, we checked out *Autumn across America* and re-read it aloud at bedtime. Here's a selection from the Puget Lowlands ecoregion, where our rainstorm evacuation route finally crossed paths with the Teales' equally sodden fall itinerary. It describes the Mima mounds near Olympia—which we missed from the juggernaut conduit of I-5—an egg-carton landform whose origin remains controversial to this day:

"Erosion was all-important in the original formation of the mounds. Why has erosion produced so little effect in the years since? The character of the fine clay soil may be a factor. The clothing of low, mossy vegetation, water-absorbing, a botanical balance-wheel, a buffer to wind and rain, may be another. No doubt the stratum of loose gravel which descends as much as 30 or 40 feet below the mounds and into which water quickly sinks, play and important part. But even so, in this land of ample rain, the changelessness of the mounds seems touched with the miraculous.

For the violence of wind-driven rain such as we met that day [what day, Ed?!] must be an old, old story to the Mima mounds. The pavements streamed. Our windshield wiper swung endlessly with a steady 'ker-foot! 'ker-foot!'ker-foot! Headlight reflections ran along the wet concrete and speeding cars passed us with a great 'swoosh!' of spray. So tumultuous was the downpour that we saw ducks sitting on farmhouse porches out of the rain. Yet such storms, storms without number through the aeons



of time, have swept across the mounds. Their permanence, their endurance, their immunity to erosion—the secret of these things seemed to us a riddle almost as great as the mystery of their origin as we drove north through the storm."

Roger Tory Peterson & James Fisher *Wild America: The legendary story of two great naturalists on the road.* 1953 (1955) Obviously, that 1997 subtitle has grown cockier since 1955. Although no amateurs at self-promotion, Peterson and Fisher when alive would probably have drawn the line somewhere short of "legendary."

More than the other less frenetic and more holistic classics described here (Kaufman's excepted), this is a book about birding. In the early 1950s, before competitive listing had sunk to the controversial, petro-guzzling depths

attained today, the term "big year" hadn't even been invented.⁵ Peterson did admit one goal was to rack up as many bird species as possible in a targeted sweep of North America. If that bird-count hadn't dangled ahead of them like a carrot, they needn't have averaged 300 miles-per-day in RT's big Ford station wagon, nor flown to the Pribilofs, subsequently an obligatory detour for serious big-year listers.

Steinbeck, a decade later, would insist that dedication to planned itineraries was poison to a good journey:

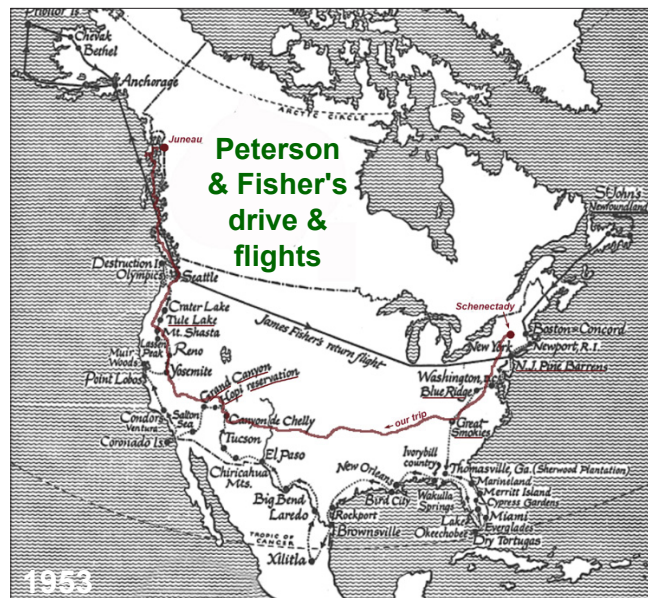
"We find after years of struggle that we do not take a trip; a trip takes us. Tour masters, schedules, reservations, brass-bound and inevitable, dash themselves to wreckage on the personality of the trip. Only when this is recognized can the blown-in-the-glass bum relax and go along with it."

John wouldn't have liked travelling with Roger and James. (Or would he? See footnote 7) On their whirlwind, tightly appointed circuit, they tended to dine with political dignitaries and ornithological aristocracy, rather than unwashed dogs. That's no judgement on my part. I stand in solidarity with Steinbeck's (counterfeit?) bumhood, and in awe of Peterson's accomplishment. For Cathy and me, 192 miles/day left barely enough time to soak up or even reliably locate "wild America." Granted, our late-fall days were shorter than Roger's spring-&-summer days. Had we upped our pace by 50% to match Peterson-Fisher's, we couldn't have camped, or veered once from the 'efficiency route' laid out as a sort of rule-to-be-broken back in New York. It's baffling to me how Peterson and Fisher extracted so much authenticity from so fleet-footed a marathon.

Wild America is a *tour de force* of natural history, powered—but not subsumed—by ambition. To his credit, RT's final tally (572 birds, an ABA record lasting only one year) was so peripheral to the book's real message that Roger relegated it to a footnote. *That*, Steinbeck would have appreciated.

John Steinbeck *Travels with Charley: In search of America* 1960 (1962) This famous road trip launched from Sag Harbor on Long Island—in the fall, like ours. While our clockwise loop swung first through the south, John's counter-clockwise circuit ended there.

⁵ Big year books are now an established genre. One was made into a comedy film starring Steve Martin, Jack Black and Owen Wilson, which I confess to enjoying. Apparently nobody else did: it cost \$41 million and grossed only 7. *Oops!*



In 1960, Steinbeck felt manhood waning. He had heart disease at 58, and would die at 66. He needed an adventure.

I admit it's stretching things a little to include Steinbeck with the 3 preceding authors, who could each lay claim to being the best-known, if not most knowledgeable, North American naturalist of the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, respectively. In part from hanging out with marine biologist and Beat-era specimen-collector Ed Ricketts, Steinbeck had become a passable naturalist. But his

gregariousness cocooned him against my kind of nature. The first half of *Travels* is less about land than conversations with waitresses, truckers and potato-pickers, and witty exchanges with a poodle.

I include Steinbeck for 2 reasons:

1) Like us, he camped—if not in a tent at least out there in the real America, in his 3/4-ton pickup named *Rocinante*, 2 years before the founding of KOA. Peattie, Teale and Peterson mostly stayed in rented rooms or with congenial hosts. Such accomodation and company brings its own charm and enlightenment, but every hour in walled conversation is an hour not smelling sagebrush, or hearing coyotes and katydids through tent-fabric, or in John's case, *Rocinante's* screen windows.⁶

2) Like ours, Steinbeck's journey collided with a national repudiation of humanity. His was more shockingly personal, but ours, I think (and hope I'm wrong) was more globally inescapable.

Approaching New Orleans from Texas in late 1960, the news was full of Ruby Bridges, first black child to attend the all-white William Frantz Elementary, which was consequently boycotted by nearly every white family. Steinbeck said he had to bear witness:

The law's majesty and power to enforce—both the scales and the sword—were allied with [Ruby], while against . . . were 300 years of fear and anger and terror of change in a changing world. . . What made newsmen love the story was a group of

6 PS 2020: Searching for background on *Travels*, I just discovered that several replicators of Steinbeck's 1960 road trip concluded it was mostly fiction. His son agreed: "He just sat in his camper a wrote all that shit." Even the 50th anniversary edition concurs that *Charley* is better understood as a novel. As a naturalist, I don't care so much that the conversations were invented or that his wife Elaine was actually with him most of the trip. But I feel cheated to learn he spent only a couple nights in *Rocinante*. He retired mostly to motels or hotels so snooty they required suit & tie for dinner.

Jeez, are Cathy and I the only adult naturalists who slept on the ground?! Kaufman did (*Kingbird* review follows) but he was 17, ferchrissakes! And dammit. . . Does this mean Charley never really pissed on that redwood? So far, I see no fact-check for the Ruby Bridges passage, November 14th, 1960. Steinbeck's description feels authentic, but he was a damned good novelist, and would have recognized how perfectly that affair encapsulated his disappointment in 1960s America. In February, 2020, Ruby Bridges received the Steinbeck Award (prior recipients: Bruce Springstein, Rachel Maddow).

stout middle-aged women who . . . gathered every day to scream invectives at children. Further, a small group of them had become expert—the Cheerleaders—and a crowd gathered every day to enjoy and to applaud their performance.

Even more "demoniac vomitings" were directed at:

the white man who dared bring his white child to school. And here he came along the guarded walk, a tall man dressed in light gray, leading his frightened child by the hand. His body was tensed as a strong leaf spring drawn to the breaking strain; his face was grave and gray, and his eyes were on the ground immediately ahead of him. The muscles of his cheeks stood out from clenched jaws, a man afraid who by his will held his fears in check as a great rider directs a panicked horse.

John was stunned and sickened. He'd seen crowds enraptured by bull-ring gorings but this was more nauseating:

"where were the others—the ones who would be proud they were of a species with the gray man—whose arms would ache to gather up the small, scared black mite?"

Steinbeck knew (hoped?) those gentler people were somewhere in that crowd, but felt as helpless as he did. In November, 2016, transiting the South, Cathy and I knew (hoped?) that this beautiful country speared with Trump signs also harbored humans who'd one day stand against the tide of heartlessness and fear. But my gut says this tide is more oceanic than the incident Steinbeck witnessed (?) in 1960. And I fear it will not subside in my lifetime. Soon, even the law may forsake Ruby.

Cathy and I had each other. The calamity troubled my dreams but more abstractly so than Steinbeck's nightmare. In days after the election we took solace from natural wonders of the Ozarks and Oklahoma. Reflecting back on our first conversations with strangers, I realize in hindsight how soothed we were at the Okie-border's welcome station by an eager booster for the state's surprising ecological diversity. Surely she guessed from our northern accents that we'd been cast adrift by November 8th in an ominously foreign country. She set us back on course, with inviting, previously unheard-of destinations. The land apologized for its owners, and comforted us.

John wasn't so lucky. In subsequent conversation, southerners proved less frothingly bestial but in a way, just as chilling, like the moment in a Dracula movie when the unanticipated canine is revealed. The horror at New Orleans, and its creepy aftershocks, took the wind from Steinbeck's sails.

Near Abingdon, in the dog-leg of Virginia, at four o'clock of a windy afternoon, without warning or good-by or kiss my foot, my journey went away and left me stranded far from home.

I've dwelt on the sad ending of *Travels* because it shares so much with the ending of civility in America, which tinted our trip, as it swamped Steinbeck's. But although *Travels* floundered in the home stretch, it's not in sum a despondent book. As I learned in my early hermitage winters—some with and some without a dog—it helps when a shaggy, nonverbal comic shares your camp. Steinbeck's humor is dark, cynical, uplifting, and cathartic. Naming a book after a poodle warns you, right upfront, that this will be irreverent. Eloquence, sure, but over-serious Peattie-esque flourishes won't be tolerated (well . . . okay, but just a few).

I mentioned earlier that nature's only a distant backdrop through *Travels'* crowded East and Midwest, where John was caught up in an (ostensibly) unbroken succession of human encounters. Then, as people dropped out of the western expanses, and as he began to really look around, we get some first-class natural history writing:

"Someone must have told me about the Missouri River at Bismarck, North Dakota, or I must have read about it. In either case, I hadn't paid attention. I came on it in amazement. Here is where the map should fold. Here is the boundary between east and west. On the Bismarck side it is eastern landscape, eastern grass, with the look and smell of eastern America. Across the Missouri on the Mandan side, it is pure west, with brown grass and water scorings and small outcrops. The two sides of the river might well be a thousand miles apart. As I was not prepared for the Missouri boundary, so I was not prepared for the Bad Lands. They deserve this name. They are like the work of an evil child. Such a place the Fallen Angels might have built

as a spite to Heaven, dry and sharp, desolate and dangerous, and for me filled with foreboding. A sense comes from it that it does not like or welcome humans. But humans being what they are, and I being human, I turned off the highway on a shaley road and headed in among the buttes, but with a shyness as though I crashed a party. The road surface tore viciously at my tires and made Rocinante's overloaded springs cry with anguish. What a place for a colony of troglodytes, or better, of trolls. And here's an odd thing. Just as I felt unwanted in this land, so do I feel a reluctance in writing about it.

The replicators It's almost *de rigeur* for travel writers to invoke earlier journeys, to give historical depth to their creations. But in some cases, entire books are constructed around these before-&-after comparisons. They face the same risks as movie sequels, but occasionally succeed. I'll note 3 such books here, as different from each other—or more so—than the 4 'originals,' in both approach and motivation. Weidensaul's is most intentionally a replication; Kaufmann and Rabhan pretty much did their own thing, but so routinely recalled their predecessors (reverently in Kaufman's case; psychoanalytically in Raban's) that there's some value in reviewing them through this window of trips-retraced.

Scott Weidensaul *Return to wild America* 200? (2005) Scott is one of our favorite naturalist-authors. Up through *Living on the wind* (1999), recycled book-jacket portraits made him look 16-years-old, which bugged me no end. Where did such a whippersnapper get so *experienced*? I've long contended there's no such thing as a born naturalist. Unlike some artists, musicians, and gymnasts who attain and deserve celebrity in their teens, natural history is simply a pedestrian accumulation of experience, accelerateable to a degree by obsessives, but rarely comprehensive until a practitioner's forties.

Turns out Scott's only 9 years younger than I am. As with other forms of date-avoidance, I suspect his adolescent-looking jacket-pics were calculated attention-grabbers from the marketing staff at North Point Press. Maybe that

"1999" photo was like a buzz-bomb lure, which doesn't simulate food, but irritates fish into striking.

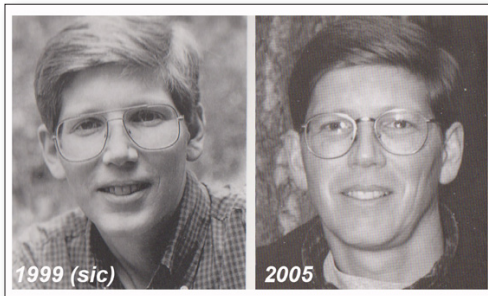
Like Peattie and Teale, Weidensaul's book is vague on dates and sequences. Most devoted to its predecessor of my 3 'replicator' books, Scott's map, mysteriously, shows only points, no connector highways. Although it didn't occur to me until beginning this review, *Return to wild America* may not actually be a road trip, at least in the classic end-to-end way we understand that label. I'm guessing Scott surgically flew to most of those 23 mapped locations, and rented cars there for short forays.

*"I would be using [Peterson & Fisher's] original itinerary as a broad framework, but I wouldn't follow it with religious precision; I'd deviate a bit from their route to visit places that best illustrate the changing landscape or to see sights that weren't even possible for them to enjoy in 1953. The pace would also be much different. Where they sprinted, I would amble. Peterson and Fisher pushed themselves relentlessly for 3 and a half brutal months, taking just 2 days off in all that time, often driving through the night to keep to Roger's meticulously plotted schedule. The breathless quality that comes from this perpetual motion is one of Wild America's charms, but I needed time to dig deeper, to look more contemplatively at a continent that has changed dramatically in 50 years. And so I would make most of the journey over the space of about 9 months, gaining in insight, I hoped, what I lost in perfect replication."*⁷

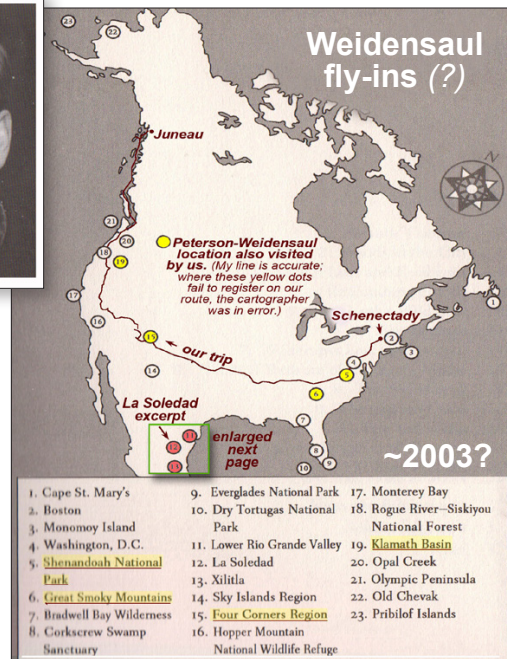
One place we intersected with Weidensaul was the Smokies, where his reaction resembled ours, threading gauntlets of tasteless commercialism smothering the park. Other places we saw that Scott (and RTP-JF) wrote about were Hopi/Navajo country, Grand Canyon, and the Klamath region. But for a sampling of *Return*, let's go south of the border, to a grassland Peterson considered anticlimactic after the Mexican cloud forest. I too, salivate over cloud forest, but on our 2016 drive, in the Wichitas, Cathy and I saw our first **prairie dogs**, and began to understand how important they once were. In Mexico, Scott found *oceans* of these keystone sciurids, as they once existed north of the border:

"We tend to imagine deserts as rocky, cactus-studded places, but—especially before settlement and

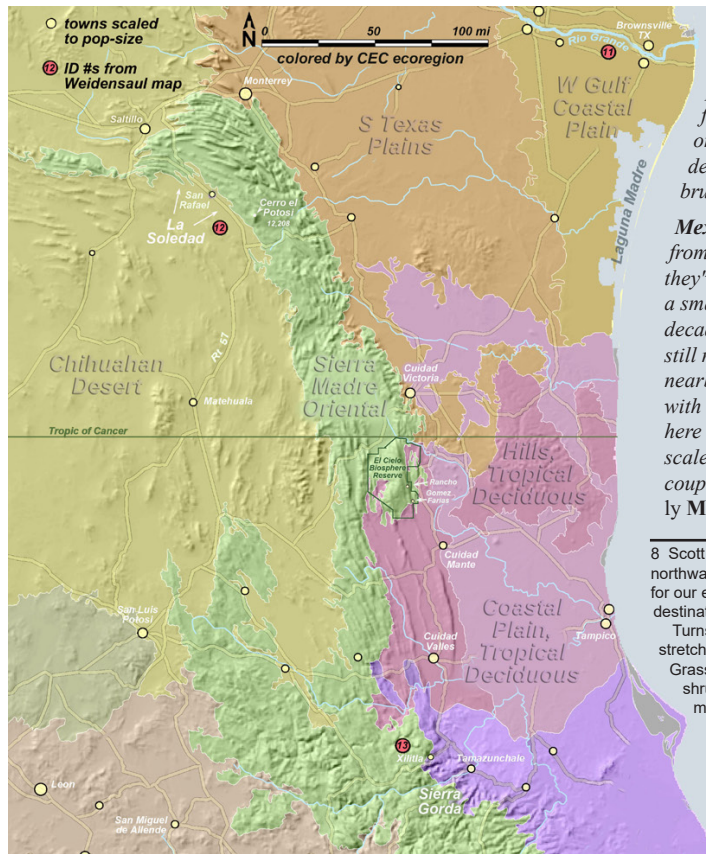
⁷ Notice we're not told in what year(s?) those 9 months took place. Back to back, or with returns home between chapters?



The until-recently ageless Scott Weidensaul, as portrayed on his dust jackets. Another form of time-fudging by book sellers? And come to think of it, do you believe 2005?



grazing—many were surprisingly grassy, including the Chihuahuan. The shortgrass prairie of the arid Texas Plains blended with the Chihuahuan, creating a sparse grassland ecosystem that continued for hundreds of miles into northern Mexico, complete with bison (now gone), vast prairie-dog towns, and endemic birds. South of Saltillo, some of the best Chihuahuan



shortgrass prairie still [as of ~2003?] survives on griddle-flat plains between high, parallel ridges—the great llanos of La Soledad⁸—but this precious relict is being turned into irrigated potato fields. . . . We drove north beyond Matahuala, up Route 57, the 'NAFTA highway,' trucks filled with goods heading to or from the US. . . . Valley floor elevation was >5,000 feet, but on the SE horizon sat huge Cerro El Potosi [12,208 ft, highest in Sierra Madre Oriental] Our destination, San Rafael, was an armpit of a town, strung out along the highway. . . . the cactus and brush a long way from the road were awash with trash snapping in the cold altiplano wind.

Mexican prairie dogs are one of 5 species that once dominated mixed- and shortgrass prairies from Saskatchewan to Mexico, >5 billion by one estimate. Thought to compete with livestock, they've been [trapped, shot and poisoned] . . . Today even the common **black-tailed** occupies only a small fraction of its original range. The Mexican species has been cut in half in just the past decade—one of the most endangered mammals in Mexico. . . . Off in the distance tractors plowed up still more virgin prairie, while machinery was demolishing forests of giant yuccas 20 or 30 feet high nearby.⁹ . . . The Mexican prairie dog digs elaborately architectural burrow systems, and "kisses" with a face-to-face nuzzle). But prairie dogs aren't about individuals; they're about numbers. And here at La Soledad, in the last place on the planet where they exist in truly enormous numbers, the scale simply overwhelms you. [In 2003, remains of the dog town were] 4 or 5 miles long and a couple miles wide. The mountains are all but uninhabited, with [cougar, jaguarundi, and reportedly Mexican wolf], a species thought to be long extinct down here. . . . Later, when I had a chance to

8 Scott notes that some ecologists prefer "arid grassland" to "shortgrass prairie," restricting the latter to central Texas northward. This led me to wonder how NE Mexico shakes out in terms of CEC ecoregions, which provided the structure for our entire crosscountry expedition. Most of a day later, my semitropical detour resulted in this map of all the RTP-SW destinations. (Sorry—as a cartographer I winced at the sketchy cartoon maps in *Return to wild America*.)

Turns out the dog-towns of La Soledad fall within the southern third of the enormous Chihuahuan Desert ecoregion, stretching 930 miles from the city San Luis Potosi almost all the way to Albuquerque, on the line of our crosscountry drive. Grass dominance distinguishes this ecoregion from the drier Sonoran to the west. With overgrazing and desertification, shrubland replaces grassland. I'd love to see La Soledad someday, if anything remains of it. Even more (but even more hopeless?) I'd love to see an old-growth cottonwood-lined stream or river, running through such a grassland.

9 During our trip we were unaware that tree-sized yuccas may be some of the oldest vascular plants on earth—far older than the most ancient bristlecones. As with creosote, outward-expanding, clonal 'fairy rings' of Mojave yucca (*Yucca schidigera*) may have germinated back in the early Holocene, ~12,000 years ago. This comes from an extraordinary 'coffee-table' photo-book by Rachel Sussman, 2014 *The oldest living things in the world*. U Chicago Press. (Joshua trees are also yuccas, but probably live "only" a few centuries.)

scuff around, I found the bones of long-dead prairie dogs in the dirt, brought up by fresh generations—the unwritten history of La Soledad.

Peterson wanted to show Fisher "wild America," and in 1953, had no reason to exclude Mexico. Cathy and I love birding there, both for exotic subtropical species and to see "our" Alaskan neotrops in places where they actually spend twice as much of their year. Today, in the hit-&-run game called "big year," few serious birders waste time in Mexico, because the ABA count-area stops at the border, and every minute south of The Wall is a minute lost to the search for "legitimate" sightings. That didn't trouble RTP or his buddy, nor did it matter to Weidensaul ("I know when I'm out of my league." Scott says, in regard to big year olympians.) Most impressively, it didn't matter to our next replicator either, who as a *highly* competitive teenager was more devoted to birds than to winning. His 'wasted time' chasing birds in Mexico cost him the North American record in 1973.

Kenn Kaufman *Kingbird highway: The biggest year in the life of an extreme birder* 1973 (1997) Nationally prominent writers in their 50s who can afford hotels and have fans in every state don't tend to rough it on road trips. Nobody reviewed so far in either the 'Originals' or 'Replicators' group slept much on the ground. So it's fun to read about a road tripper who pushed 'shoestrings birding' about as far as it can go.

I identify with Kenn Kaufman, because in 1973 I too (at the age of 23) was hitching back and forth across the continent on an annual grubstake of well under \$1000. In my case it wasn't after birds, but wilderness. Kenn was only 17 that year, but had already far surpassed me, for thumb-powered mileage, and in the frugality department. He routinely sold blood for grubstakes, could make \$50 stretch for a month, never stayed in motels, bought discounted perishables and—when savings wore thin—dry Friskies.



Dust-jacket photo of Roger Peterson and Kenn Kaufman during Kenn's big year in 1973.

Kaufman wrote this story a quarter century after it happened, about the birth of birding between 1970 and 1975. Most obsessive listers of that era channeled RTP, who not only catalogued the quarry but legitimized the hobby:

The other boys in my neighborhood idolized baseball players or movie cowboys, but my hero was the great bird expert, Roger Tory Peterson. I had checked his books out from the library and read them over and over again. I had studied all of his paintings, especially of the birds I could not find in the South Bend suburbs. The bible of my early teen years had been a book called Wild America. . . my daily passport [out of the Kansas suburbs] to the wilderness. . . Peterson and Fisher were interested in all of nature, and . . . they wrote of everything from rocks and ferns to snakes and bears. But they were birdmen first. Wherever they traveled they sought out as many birds as they could, watching them, photographing them, filming them, recording their voices,

writing detailed notes about them, and of course, keeping a list of everything they saw.

When Roger was ticking off warblers in 1953, he could only have dreamed of the phone-based rare-bird network that blossomed over the next 2 decades. It was essential to Kaufman's *modus operandi*. If a spotted redshank turned up in New Jersey when Kenn was in the Chiricahuas, then out went the thumb—2,500 miles for a bird, who in that instance turned out to be a hallucination. "Got to be good-lookin cuz he's so hard to see." Now, of course, bird alerts go out over the internet, Sibley apps identify them, and ebird pools everyone's data, to the benefit of ornithologists as well as twitchers.

As previously postulated, there's no way Kenn—or anyone else—could have been a well-rounded naturalist at 17. But his early mastery of birding begs the question; do sharp eyes and ears, willingness to sleep in ditches,

lose 30 pounds, and devote >10,000 hours¹⁰ to the study of avian field marks and long-distance flight 'gestalt' make this weird sport more akin to the arts and ski-racing than to the plodding craft of the natural historian? In *Kingbird Highway*, you'll learn tons about birds, but only ounces about other lifeforms, geology, or Native culture. Kaufman is now a good naturalist, but that wasn't his aspiration in 1973, and in his 1996 retrospective, he rightly stuck to the birds.

During Kenn's marathon big year, he hooked up several times with teams of elite birders older than his parents on big day sprints—24 exhausting hours in pursuit of list-topping glory.

"Pulling up to the Texas City Dike, we leaped out of the car like gunslingers, binoculars blazing. In a matter of moments we had checked off 2 dozen new birds. [then] back in the car, driving away. 'No time for aesthetics!' laughed Stuart Keith."

As hyper as that sounds, I know the feeling. It's like plunging into Palo Duro Canyon in the last hours of daylight, fast-walking to Red River, grabbing 6.5 minutes of aerial video (& bonus clips of kokopelli!), then dashing for Amarillo. It's in fact my normal practise in field surveys and even more intense 'vacations,' whenever I'm in a place I may never get to see again—where efficiency trumps relaxed observation. No time for aesthetics! If you do justice to notes, pictures, movies and gps tracks, there'll be time enough to make sense of it all later. What might to the uninitiated seem like disrespect to the quarry—birds, fluvial sinuities, North American cultural geography—is by our standards the ultimate hat-tip; we forsake personal comfort and full enjoyment in the moment to paint a richer picture in the studio at trip's end.

10 In *Outliers*, 2011, Malcolm Gladwell maintained that 10,000 hours of practice are prerequisite to master-level achievement. But achievement at what? A true obsessive can log 10,000 hours in a couple years. By 17, I'm sure Kaufman had many times 10K hours. Since I plunged into natural history, around 1980, I've probably 'practised' >150,000 hours, and wouldn't have called myself a *real* naturalist until maybe 50K. Anyway, the 10K rule has been widely debunked. In a meta-analysis of 88 studies, deliberate practise proved less important than we thought: Macnamara *et al.* 2014. *Deliberate practice & performance in music, games, sports, education, & professions*. *Psychological Science*. Vol. 25(8)

Jonathan Raban *Passage to Juneau: A sea and its meanings* 199? (1999). Selecting 'road' trip books that coincide geographically with ours leaves a hole in the last week's reach, where boats replace cars. As with auto-travel, adventuring in boats is a time-honored genre. No Inside Passage chronicals I can think of since Muir's *Travels in Alaska* were written by top-tier naturalists. But in keeping with the theme of travel-writing-as-replication, let's look at one by Jonathan Raban.

Born 1942, a British-expat Seattlite since 1990, Raban's a mariner, world traveler, and story teller. His solo cruise from Seattle to Juneau is recounted in a skillfully meandering blend of "*narrative and discursive writing*." His ketch *Penelope's* library housed the journals of George Vancouver (1791-95), which probably did to Raban's already-dark mood what reading Cormack McCarthy or John Straley does to mine. "

We're fortunate, however, that Raban braved Vancouver's run-on sentences and deepening mental illness. Tracking Vancouver through nearly every chapter, Raban offers not only cartographic explication but an intriguing diagnosis:

"Vancouver named his land- and sea-marks after high-ups at the Admiralty, whose goodwill might lead to his promotion; after old friends and mentors, . . . after incidents of the voyage; and after his own bipolar mental states. Most of his names stuck. Two hundred years later one could read the charts of the Northwest coast as a candid diary of Vancouver's expedition; a map of his mind, in all its changing moods and preoccupations"

Not that I need to know how bummed George was by Disenchantment Bay, or with which irrelevant Englishmen he branded my favorite islands. And yet, to understand the Northwest Coast, and the pre-contact cultures we Euros elbowed aside, Vancouver—or at least Vancouver Cliff Notes—is essential

11 I should know better than to wallow in elegantly depressing literature when traveling alone. Thinking it appropriate to read place-based fiction *en situ*, I tortured myself in New Mexico's Animus Range with McCarthy's melancholic *The Crossing*, and on a long solo kayak trip with *Woman who married the bear*. In person, Straley's one of Alaska's funniest authors. But I never cracked a smile over *Woman*, which laid an expectation of doom over my journey for days until I threw it overboard.

reading. In *Passage to Juneau*, Vancouverian nuggets are served up for the 21st-century by a gloomy countryman well-qualified to understand him.

Jonathan is master of the put-down. *Passage* opens with a scathingly condescending picture of a "big lummox" looking for work at Fisherman's Terminal. Raban's humor is like Steinbeck's but meaner; I hope I don't wander into his sights when he's researching his next book. Among many recipients of his skepticism, bracingly free of political correctness, is the Northwest Coast cultural renaissance. As repentant colonialists, we Euros now smile and nod when friends invent or regurgitate dubious histories and sanitized traditions. Raban's unmoved, more intrigued by logic than popularity. Like me, he's annoyed by "time immemorial," pointing out, for example, that tree-sized cedar carvings are a recent artform whose flourishing awaited ubiquitous iron tools and an export market.

Nor is Raban duped by rugged Alaskan individualism:

Alaska liked to advertise itself as "The Last Frontier," a slogan tinged with self-canceling whimsy since it appeared on vehicle registration plates, courtesy of the state licensing department. If the phrase could now be held to mean anything at all, it belonged to the sea, not the land; and the sea around Alaska was a real wilderness, as wild and lonely as any territory in the American past.

Although contrarian exposition wears thin after awhile, it keeps readers on their toes, if only to spar with the author. I had to chuckle at the above disparagement of Alaska's terrestrial wilderness, by one who probably never poked more than 30 yards into it. Ashore alone on the empty grounds of a cannery ruin, Raban couldn't wait to get back to his ketch, safe from bears. We *Discovery Southeast* naturalists recognize and treat bearanoia, a common affliction in our third-to-fifth-grade students, but I didn't expect it of a global voyager.

I guess it's unfair to ask for natural history (or cheerfulness) in *Passage to Juneau*. It's better for historical geography (though more maps would've been nice), for sights and smells and personalities of the North Pacific, and

for unveiling the demons of coastal seafarers, resident and passers-through. We know precious little of the lives and thoughts of pre-contact inhabitants. Did they—like Raban—face the sea and fear the land? And in committing to the ocean's lesser monsters as their highway and food-larder, how did they appease *its* frightful whimsies?

For the Kwakwaka'wakw (Raban used the now-discouraged "Kwakiutl"), that shape-shifter is Komogwa, "*lord of oceanic disorder and chaos.*" Hmm, thinks Raban, that's the Greeks' Proteus, god of the fickle sea. A pre-canadian redcedar paddler . . .

" . . . would have found it easy to adapt to Homer's sea, with its reigning winds and creaturely powers . . . though he might have found Charybdis a little tame after the canoe-guzzling whirlpools of his home waters."

Naturalists—such as Teale, Peterson, Weidensaul and Kaufman—are generally a happy lot, at home with bears and rooted in terra firma, a more motherly foundation than brooding seas or literary erudition, the fortés of Jonathan Raban. You can safely read most naturalists' journals (Peattie excepted?) without sliding into morosity. I apologize for ending this roadtrip review on a downbeat.

Dang-it though, that's the bed we've made and must lie in. The Northwest *is* a dark and moldy home. It's not for everybody, which some of us appreciate, and laugh about, as Komogwa slithers through the harbor.