

WHERE THE WILD THINGS WERE

William Stolzenburg published *Where the Wild Things Were: Life, Death, and Ecological Wreckage in a Land of Vanishing Predators* (2008) three years before OR-7 began his famous wanderings. Yet he's been much on this reader's mind, because Stolzenburg explains, as no one locally has, why Oregon and California wildlife officials might bless, instead of blast, this no longer lone wolf.

Maybe because study after study has shown that top predators like OR-7 are drivers, not passengers. With them, ecosystems thrive: streamside vegetation grows lush, streams flow clear, animal populations stabilize. Without them, browsers like deer and elk may eat themselves out of house and home, and in a "trophic cascade" all other species suffer; biodiversity plummets, and in the worst scenarios, ecosystems collapse.

The key in this case seems to be fear.

By the early 1920's a nationwide government-funded effort to rid the U.S. of predators had eradicated Yellowstone Park's wolves. Elk proliferated, and had soon browsed streamside vegetation so low that no new trees could sprout. Streams warmed, and streamside creatures suffered or disappeared, including songbirds.

Then, in 1995, wolves were reintroduced and aspen, willow and cottonwood came back. Also, because wolves left carrion from kills, both predators and prey thrived in a “never ending scavenger’s ball.” Streams cleared, and beavers, songbirds and other creatures returned.

Constant fear, biologists suggested, kept the elk moving along, eating just enough to stimulate new growth. And because most wolf kills occurred along streams – riparian corridors support 80 percent of species in the American West – the new mantra became, “Wolves control rivers.”

In the East, land of the Whitetail, the mantra is, “Deer control forests.” In the absence of top predators, and protected by hunters who apparently can’t imagine too many of them, deer mow seedlings, forests grow senescent, weeds proliferate, songbirds and pollinators plummet. Deer have become “hoofed locusts.”

Similar stories have crowded in from many regions, involving many species.

When starfish (the top predator) were removed from a Northwest tide pool, half the species disappeared.

With the near-obliteration of sea otters, Pacific kelp beds – the sea’s rainforest – shrank, eaten by sea urchins, which exploded without predatory control.

By 2003, 90 percent of the ocean's big predators were gone.

Perhaps saddest of all, in a newly flooded Venezuelan valley, on islands too small to support predators, howler monkeys are now silent and solitary, reduced to eating venomous foliage, amidst hordes of leaf-cutter ants, thorny vines and lianas.

Without such top predators as wolves, mesopredators -- raccoons, jays, opossums, crows, squirrels, and yes, domestic animals, proliferate. Where not controlled by coyotes, cats alone slaughter many millions of songbirds a year.

But – at least to re-vivify the forests – can't humans replace the top predators? Stolzenburg suggests not: humans cull not the least fit, but the best, as trophies. Hunters instill fear for a few weeks, not as a constant controlling presence. And they never deliberately leave carrion, crucial to so many scavengers and their associates.

So if we care about healthy wildlands, we need OR-7. We've increased our tolerance for predators, Stolzenburg says, at least from the days when government agents rained strychnine-laced fat pellets over rangelands.

Besides wolves, we've re-introduced lynx, cougars, jaguars, black bears and coyotes to hitherto barren environments. Others have suggested re-wilding with cousins of the wild

animals once endemic here – horses, camels, lions, elephants, etc.

A few hardy souls have learned to live peaceably with wolves and cougars, using protective corrals, large dogs, cracker shells and rubber bullets. And grizzlies could be similarly controlled.

But will it happen? Unfortunately videophilia is trumping biophilia (an innate love for living things) and you can't love what you don't see. And every generation accepts what it's born into as the norm.

So the prospects for OR-7 are dim. Enjoy him while you can.