

Nature Wars and Deerland

THE FLIP SIDE OF WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY

By David G. Hewitt



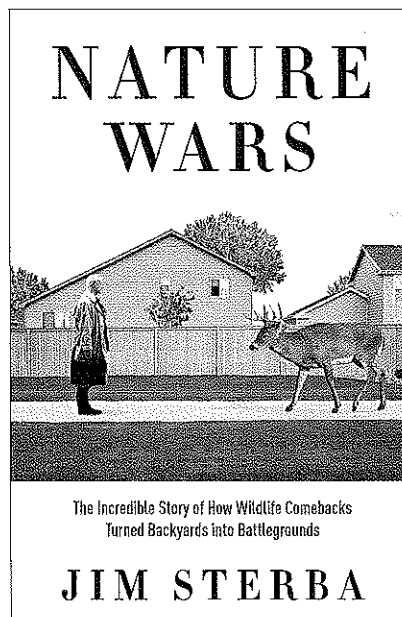
Courtesy of David G. Hewitt

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Two new books, written for a lay audience by non-scientists, tell the tale of the new reality in North American wildlife conservation today—that an overabundance of wildlife is overlapping with human habitats. Whereas most conservation books for the general public have focused on species and habitats threatened with extinction, these new books explore the equally fascinating challenge of abundance, a reality lived daily by wildlife biologists throughout North America. It's an intriguing tale that the public needs to hear. And because of the engaging writing in these books, the public may come to understand and appreciate the challenges wildlife managers face.

In *Nature Wars: The Incredible Story of How Wildlife Comebacks Turned Backyards into Battlegrounds* (Crown Publishers 2012), author Jim Sterba sets the stage with a personal tale of revelation while combating grape vines in a reverting field near the coast of Maine. From this stage, Sterba describes the landscape changes that have occurred across the eastern United States since the 1600s, including near-total deforestation followed by extensive reforestation and mass movement of people out of cities into suburbs and exurbs. Arriving at the present, Sterba proclaims, "It is very likely that more people live in closer proximity to more wild animals and birds in the eastern United States today than anywhere on the planet at any time in history."

These burgeoning wildlife populations and their interactions with people are the basis of *Nature Wars*. To illustrate the history and current status of species that adapt well to human-influenced



Credit: Crown Publishing

spaces, Sterba tells the stories of white-tailed deer, bears, beavers, wild turkeys, and Canada geese. Populations of these species in North America were decimated in the 1800s and early 1900s and then rebounded to the point that all are now managed as pest species in many areas.

Sterba relates the experiences of wildlife professionals tasked with controlling damage caused by these species and the controversy that arises around such efforts. He cites, for example, the animal-control work of Don LaFountain in Massachusetts, who has learned not only how to humanely capture beavers and other creatures in a sub-

urban setting, but also how to handle the probing questions such activities inevitably provoke. "Man's the bad guy and nature's all balanced until something turns up in their attic," says LaFountain. "Then they need me." No doubt many among us can relate.

The return of deciduous forests and changes in development patterns are only part of the reason why wildlife flourishes in areas where it was once rare. Another reason Sterba cites is the "denatured life" of a growing number of people and the resulting shift in attitudes toward wildlife. To illustrate this, Sterba discusses roadkill, bird feeding, and feral-cat management. He notes the public's apparent immunity to the wildlife carnage on our roads, the popularity of feeding birds for recreation, and the acceptance of using precious resources to maintain populations of feral cats—all symptoms of a populace that has lost touch with nature's realities. Such a populace will have attitudes about animals that enable unusually dense populations of humans and wildlife to co-exist—and make controlling wildlife populations controversial.



In *Deerland: America's Hunt for Ecological Balance and the Essence of Wildness* (Lyons Press 2013) author Al Cambronne likewise seeks to broaden understanding of passionate and sometimes obsessive interactions with wildlife by holding up a more focused, but no less revealing, looking glass into which the American public and wildlife biologists may peer.

Instead of understanding human-wildlife interactions in the U.S. through centuries-long vegetation changes and the history of several prominent species, Cambronne focuses on the rise of "the deer-industrial complex" during the past 40 years. This complex involves an intricate web of connections among sporting goods companies, landowners, hunters and outfitters, meat-processors, grain-mill operators, people who feed and bait deer, government agencies, and even auto-body repair shops. Cambronne conveys the heartfelt goals and desires of each of these constituencies, noting, for example, how baiting deer has seeped so deep into the culture and economy of rural Wisconsin that one feed-mill operator made 13 trips to the state capital to lobby, successfully, against a ban on feeding and baiting deer.

Cambronne then demonstrates how the resulting high densities of deer spread disease, damage crops and vehicles, cause conflict in suburbs, and alter forest ecosystems to the detriment of many plant and animal species. And he describes the plight of state wildlife agencies as they struggle to manage deer populations with a limited and increasingly outdated toolbox. He notes that recreational hunting—the biggest tool in the box—is clearly not

effective in most suburban areas and is increasingly ineffective in rural areas because of shrinking hunter numbers and more landowners opposed to hunting.

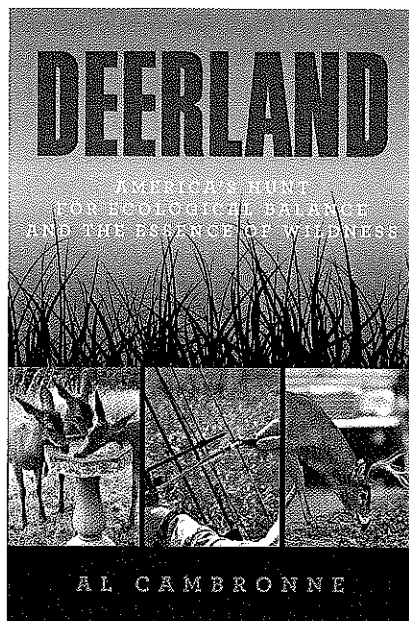
Keys to Credibility

Cambronne and Sterba present clear-eyed and accurate accounts of the motivations of the various groups interested in wildlife. In doing so, readers may get their hackles up when the lens is turned on one of their sacred cows. However, I suspect that most members of The Wildlife Society will agree with many of the books' conclusions because the authors' sentiments align closely with those of contemporary wildlife management.

For example, both authors cite hunting and lethal control as acceptable approaches to population control, but this conclusion is only arrived at after considering alternatives such as moving problem animals to a new location or controlling populations using contraception.

Notably, both authors buck traditional wildlife conservation sentiment and state law throughout the U.S. by broaching the idea that a regulated, commercial harvest of white-tailed deer may be necessary to control populations in areas where traditional control methods are inappropriate or have failed. Cambronne interviews authors of a *Wildlife Society Bulletin* article published in 2011 that thoroughly addresses the idea of commercial deer harvest and draws parallels to kangaroos in Australia, which are harvested commercially because of difficulty in addressing their damage in any other manner.

Given that neither author is a wildlife professional—Serba is a foreign correspondent and national affairs reporter and Cambronne is a freelance writer



Credit: Lyons Press



and photographer—it's interesting to note that both books are steeped in traditional and contemporary wildlife management. The authors discuss The North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, for example, and rely on the USDA and state wildlife agencies for illuminating data. (For example, Cabronne notes that the appraised crop damage from deer in Wisconsin is six times greater than the depredation claims against the state's 700 wolves.) They also use information provided by The Wildlife Society, such as a description of the North American Model and a quote from former Executive Director Michael Hutchins about the animal-rights philosophy.

Each book regularly references the primary scientific literature, and both have an extensive notes section documenting the source of specific statements and information. The authors also consulted and even spent time afield with biologists. Cambronne made it a point to interact personally with representatives of a dizzying variety of white-tailed deer stakeholder groups, including

outfitters, feed dealers, USDA crop inspectors, highway patrolmen, foresters, hunters, rural-land realtors, meat processors, state white-tailed deer biologists, suburban homeowners, and the archers who hunt suburban properties.

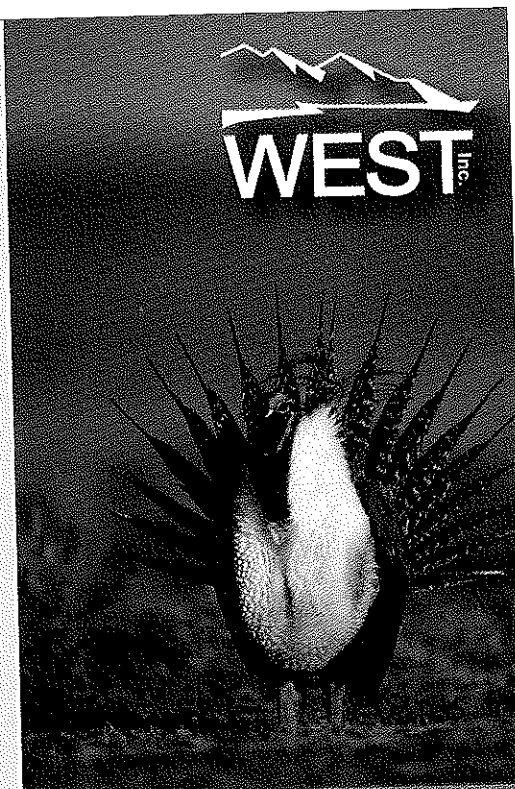
Wildlife biologists reading these books likely will recognize the names of friends and colleagues, lending further credence to both works. Mike Conover, Jim Heffelfinger, Brian Murphy, and Mike Tonkovich are a few colleagues of mine who were consulted in the books. I should also note that a book I recently published was cited in *Deerland*, a surprise I discovered while reading.

In terms of the writing, *Nature Wars* is sweeping in scope, witty in tone, and polished. The book has received extensive press coverage, and Sterba has been interviewed in several mainstream media outlets, including National Public Radio, thereby expanding the audience for his message. Students of wildlife management—who are increasingly from urban backgrounds and have a romanticized understanding of nature and its management—will be left wide-eyed but enlightened after reading the book, while wildlife biologists will benefit from the context the book provides for their profession.

Deerland is focused, folksy, and effective in bringing to light the causes and the cultural, economic, and ecological effects of burgeoning white-tailed deer populations. The book is centered on the upper midwestern U.S., but the message resonates across most of the white-tailed deer's range. *Deerland* could have benefitted from one last round of editing, and there were minor details that were technically incorrect, such as the digestibility of lignin, the order of compartments in a deer's digestive system, and an agent used for immunocontraception. However, these flaws did not negate the book's overall message about how infatuation with deer has stressed social and ecological systems and how wildlife biologists struggle to achieve balance among society's competing objectives.

In short, both *Deerland* and *Nature Wars* are books about contemporary wildlife issues that will be of interest to lay audiences and professional biologists alike. As we grapple with these issues, it's gratifying to see that books produced for the general public can help accurately educate people about the challenges that wildlifers face every day. ■

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