

## A FIELD GUIDE TO THE ANTS OF NEW ENGLAND



## NATURE WARS



JIM STERBA

## HUNGER MOUNTAIN

DAVID HINTON

### A Field Guide to the Ants of New England

By Aaron M. Ellison, Nicholas J. Gotelli,  
Elizabeth J. Farnsworth, and Gary D. Alpert  
Yale University Press, 2012

**Authors and publishers** of field guides, take note: the bar has gone up with *A Field Guide to the Ants of New England*.

Ants?

Ants. Lilliputian ants whose entire colony is enclosed in an acorn, ants that parasitize other ant species, ant mimics, and other insects that find room and board in ant nests. The tiny lives of New England's 132 species could be the stuff of children's books or action movies.

The Guide includes everything you've ever wished for in a field guide: unforbidding keys with an illustration whenever you need one, fascinating natural history information, a macro-photo and an illustration of each species, a photo of the species' typical habitat, a shorthand indication of distinguishing features, and an occasional laugh.

The structure of the book works extremely well. Concise, well-written introductory chapters put ants into a landscape context, discuss their evolution, ecology, and behavior, and explain how to identify, observe, collect, draw, and photograph ants. You'll need all of these skills because the book makes you want to do them all. Its only undesirable characteristic is its weight. However, since it opens a whole new universe right under your feet and is a pure pleasure to look at, this doesn't seem like an inconvenience.

There are keys to subfamilies (that's where I'll be starting), genera, and species. They are a joy to use. Almost every trait is illustrated in the margin (big enough to see, too), and the keys are written as a sort of reverse glossary. They use simple English descriptors with technical terms in parentheses, so you don't need to flip to the back of the book every other minute because you've forgotten exactly what "spatulate" means. In addition to the standard dichotomous keys, there is a matrix key.

Whoever thought this one up should be designing car radios. It is a visual key that illustrates the body shape, color, and relative size of all of the species in a genus, along with close-ups of their distinguishing features.

The authors are specialists in entomology with wide-ranging interests in ecology. Where expertise could have made them pedantic, they come across instead as personal and passionate. Elizabeth Farnsworth's illustrations are exquisite and abundant and must be worth a total of a million words. Speaking of words, one of the nicest features is that each Latin name is translated, and each genus and species is assigned a popular name based on a distinctive character or behavior. If you can't remember *Paratrechina*, for example, you may recall The Somewhat Hairy Ant, and when you find an ant nesting in a boreal bog, you'll surely remember The Leptothorax of the Moss, and so find your way to *Leptothorax sphagnicola*.

Where have ants been all my life? "The world is so full of a number of things, I think we should all be as happy as kings," said Robert Louis Stevenson in *A Child's Garden of Verses*. He probably would have liked this book. Oh, yes. E.O. Wilson liked it too.

JOAN WALTERMIRE

### Nature Wars: The Incredible Story of How Wildlife Comebacks Turned Backyards into Battlegrounds

By Jim Sterba  
Crown, 2012

**The Northeast has become** a hive of ecological counter-intuition, at least by the framework of any living memory. According to Jim Sterba's *Nature Wars: The Incredible Story of How Wildlife Comebacks Turned Backyards into Battlegrounds*, farm abandonment and the slow growth of trees are chief culprits, along with the more rapid wean of people from the natural world, even as they've ebbed from city to exurb. It's there, where sprawl meets forest reclamation, that the generations

reared believing that nature had long absconded tragically "over the horizon, or way up north," have been forced to reconsider old assumptions.

While Sterba's work might rightfully be lumped with the general fret of American detachment from the natural world, *Nature Wars* joins a recent publishing spate that urges ditching the Disneyesque ecosentiment. Such well-intended mawkishness, Sterba implies, was a natural excrescence in the wake of centuries of crippling agricultural practices and the febrile slaughter of wildlife and trees, which left a majority of the North Woods a near lifeless hay field. Sterba traces the morphology of vanished fauna into the cuddly avatars of Thumper and Teddy, and from there the yearn to prohibit any human encroachment on the land whatsoever. As a Depression-born farm kid, he watched first with amusement and then concern as sprawl dwellers have struggled to accept the wildlife reflooding a suddenly tree-giddy Northeast.

Rather than the plaintive wards of national parks and the Canadian outback, then, wildlife and trees have again become neighbors; even urbanscapes now host impressive woodlots. Sterba details how this happened, first with the trees then the animals they drew. With a journalism background, he deftly chronicles the history of forest-to-farm-to-forest, followed by twentieth-century efforts to replenish wildlife, which according to many whom Sterba interviews have passed from heartening endeavor to disastrous success. Focusing on geese, bears, beavers, deer, and turkeys, the book's second section follows each species from pre-European-contact plentitude to the collective holocaust that ensues, ending with their current status as suburban apocalyptics. Even those fluent in natural history will revel in Sterba's telling, and likely learn a great deal in the process. The reason why many Canada geese have stopped migrating, for instance, or just how close white-tailed deer came to extinction, is fascinating. Not everyone, of course, wishes these creatures to reappear, but many people have become what Sterba coins "species partisans," fighting with litigation and death threats the many movements to manage wildlife reasonably. As a