

Robert Michael Pyle



The Thunder Tree

LESSONS FROM AN URBAN WILDLAND



"Heartening and true and elegant."

—WILLIAM KITTREDGE

THE
THUNDER
TREE



Lessons From an
Urban Wildland

ROBERT MICHAEL PYLE



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CIP

*For Tom,
who found the Thunder Tree,
and
for his family,
Mary Margaret, Heather, and Michael*

*and in memory of
Lois Webster,
conservationist, naturalist, and lover of the High Line*



*“In my time, a man can’t discover a river, but he can always be
on the lookout for an unexplored ditch.”
—Sam McKinney, *Reach of Tide, Ring of History**

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Preface to the 1998 Edition

RESTING on a paperweight upon my desk, as I sit to write this new welcome to a book that's been around, lies the crisp carcass of a road-killed butterfly. A common wood nymph, it is the species of animal that, perhaps more than any other, drew me back and back to the High Line Canal during my younger summers. A fresh male, its wings are of a rich otter-brown, striated with darker flecks and crescents, spotted with the bullseye circlets that suggest its old, Eastern Seaboard vernacular: the blue-eyed grayling.

Just now, after an April breeze nudged it from its pedestal, I reached to replace it beside the decapitated blue darner. The tip of my finger felt the silky surface of the wing with something like a soft thunderclap of recognition. I was suddenly transported to a realm of mud and willow; long grass overhanging slimy, sweetly stinking banks; moving water; and the queries of magpies. The days of long-gone summers are endless and undying but they only return, later on, in flashes impossible to grasp for long. This casual, inadvertent touch sparked such an instant for me.

From the beginning, I hoped for this book to be like that for readers: the stories from my place of succor, delight, and initiation would furnish a spyhole on the long-left, often-lost special places of others. In this I have been richly rewarded. A continuous stream of letters, calls, and personal approaches, modest in absolute number but immodest in passion of expression, has let me know that my ditch indeed speaks of everybody's ditch. A surprising number of the people who approach me after lectures or readings, or who take precious time to write, tell of actual acquaintance with the ditch of my own dreams, the High Line Canal of Colorado. Many more say that it is in the subtle but nourishing qualities shared by all hand-me-down lands that they have recognized their own long-ago valhallas and vacant lots.

Thus gratified by readers' responses, I am especially pleased that the

Lyons Press is bringing *The Thunder Tree* out again, so that it might carry on reminding us of the value of the too-often unappreciated wildness that resides at the edges of our homelands, and pricking our memories toward the particular places that made us. I am grateful to Lilly Golden of the Lyons Press for embracing the book, and to my splendid literary agent, Jennifer McDonald of Curtis Brown Ltd., for bringing us together. I don't think it will spoil anyone's first reading if I bring a few of the essays up to date with a detail here, a development there; and it may give return visitors an enhanced sense of how things are, and how change always embellishes the passage of time.

First, the new cover. From the time I first saw it in a catalogue of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, from an exhibit of American Luminist painters, I felt that Worthington Whittredge's *On the Cache La Poudre River, Colorado* perfectly embodied the sense of the watercourse on the High Plains that the old canal once typified. I am grateful to the Amon Carter Museum of Fort Worth, Texas, for making it available.

Further research of the great hailstorm of 1954 has borne out my memories. In 1997, seventeen people were hospitalized by such a hailstorm in southeastern Colorado.

The chapter "Snodgrass, Tatum, and Beasley" tells the story of the three Mikes whose genuine rural existence I envied from within my suburban tract. Following a reading I gave at Black Oak Books in Berkeley, California, two almost-familiar faces approached me. They turned out to belong to old school chums, Bill Bannister and the aforementioned Beasley. They had only kind words to say about the book; and later, when Beasley sent me a thoughtful, delightful letter about old and new times and the ditch we had shared, including a wonderful snapshot of our Cub Scout den (see "Magpie Days"), he signed it, simply, "Beas." Later, at our thirtieth high school reunion, I was talking with old friends Jack Jeffers and Bill Sampson, when Bill asked me diplomatically, "Isn't Beasley's name *Gary*?" "Sure, Gary Beasley," I said; and then "Oh, jeez!" The penny dropped: I had made him into a Mike, for a better fit among his farm neighbors Mike Tatum and Mike Snodgrass. In meeting and writing to me, Gary had been too kind to bring the error to my attention. Well, it was an honest alias I gave him, insofar as it was done subconsciously and ingenuously, not for intentional effect. So Gary you are, Beas, but in the essay Mike you shall remain.

Speaking of Jack Jeffers, my boyhood best friend and butterfly-hunting boon companion, I owe him a modest emendation as well. In "Butterflies in Winter," I tell how our paths sundered, leaving our friendship intact but ending our days afield with nets together. On reading it, Jack concurred in the basic facts of the matter. But he told me that it was not the peer pressure alone, as I had suggested, that discouraged him. His defection owed at least as much to the more scientific orientation my interest was taking. As Jack saw it, the butterflies themselves were being eclipsed by a flurry of Latin names, the adventurous by the academic, the casual by the curatorial. Though he became a better scientist in college than I, and eventually a professional mathematician, our days afield in search of Olympia marble-wings and goatweed emperors had meant more to him for the thrill of the chase than for the facts of the matter. It wasn't just the jeers that put him off. This is an important distinction.

The growth of Aurora and environs has, of course, gone on. Denver International Airport, a city in itself whose white tents loom across the plains, has materialized. It did not, in the end, obliterate the old endpoint of the High Line. However, Denver Water eventually recovered the rights from the last farm or two and ceased supplying water beyond Green Valley Ranch, where the canal now empties into First Creek. The lateral branch that takes out just upstream and runs toward Derby Lake in the old Rocky Mountain Arsenal now finds itself watering a wildlife refuge. But Denver Water still makes noises about pulling all the flow from the green umbilicus of the High Line Canal, now that its former farm customers have largely been displaced by housing and have graduated to piped city water.

When I returned to Denver to launch *The Thunder Tree* five years ago, Denver Water made a show of welcoming the book's conclusions and criticism. Chips Barry, the engaging general manager of the huge system, welcomed me to the podium at a ceremony for a large tree-planting event coordinated by Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado. However, the vigorous volunteer planting of thousands of pines, maples, and other small ornamentals, many of which die for lack of water and care, can be a smoke screen for the continued removal of the great old cottonwoods that define the High Line Canal as a place. And when it comes to the crunch, Denver Water still tends to back growth over the much-beloved amenity of the canal that is still its vital charge.

The residents of Highlands Ranch, a vast subdivision that replaced the actual ranch by that name, requested another interchange on the beltway known as C-470 (mistakenly called I-470 on page 28). The interchange was largely extraneous, but would take a few minutes off a few folks' commutes. It would also cause the removal of many gracious big trees, the diversion and concrete channeling of the canal, noise and danger for trail walkers and riders, and the sully of one of the most beautiful sections of the waterway, above McClellan Reservoir. Canal neighbors, users, and lovers, led by the High Line Crossing cohousing community, objected and fought valiantly. But Denver Water issued permission, and the bulldozers rolled. So it is that several sections of the canal path might no longer closely resemble their descriptions in these pages.

But there have been gains as well. A couple of years ago I learned of a fine cattail marsh ringed by woodland, just south of my old haunts, that incredibly I had never known before. It lay just outside the bounds of my childhood home range as described in "Mile Roads." Tipped off by Sandra Tassel of the Trust For Public Lands, I visited Jewell Wetlands, got lost in the pollen storm of the cattails, and wrote letters on its behalf. Happily, TPL eventually bought the site to protect its marshy charms for local kids and creatures. Aurora's open space system has also grown out near Sand Creek, where our annual butterfly counts still take place.

Yes, the extinction of experience goes on and on. But the extent to which curious children will still be able to find what I found along the canal will depend upon the degree of love, care, and action exercised on its behalf. Recently, I learned that activists defeated a plan to pave and widen the canal path over a significant length, to turn it from a flowered rural track to just another road. Indeed, the citizen clientele for the High Line's emerald hems grows stronger each year as more people walk, ride, bicycle, and otherwise enjoy the expanding system of trails of which it forms the essential notochord. It is pleasing to know that this book has bolstered the efforts of canal conservators and their counterparts in other communities, and that in its new incarnation it will be available once more to back up the lovers of local lands.

And they are more and more all the time, as people realize what they have lost and what they stand to save. At that thirty-year reunion, in 1995, organizers and old pals Terry Truman and Greg Bradshaw asked

me to lead a nature hike along the canal. My initial response was "Oh, sure!" I figured about as many people would come as used to accompany my canal rambles those many years ago: none, unless Jack rejoined me. But in the end, more than fifty of the attendees walked with me, including the mothers of two former classmates. I was amazed. The times truly have brought both an increased appreciation of the secondhand lands, and the place they should hold in our denser and denser communities. As we sauntered, I heard from my fellow alums (as from other old friends, at other times and places) about their own relationship with the canal and their ditchwater adventures, completely unknown to me before. Again and again, I learn how everyone who cares about the world outside can think back to a particular place that made a difference in their apprehension of the earth.

A literature of the ex-urban wild has been slowly and solidly growing, from Richard Mabey's *Unofficial Countryside* to Scott Russell Sanders's *Paradise of Bombs* to Robert Sullivan's *The Meadowlands*, about the wonders of the trashed marshes of New Jersey, just outside Manhattan. More and more, we are discovering that the authentic wilderness of the mountains and deserts, though essential, is not enough to provide for a largely urban and overbloated population of humans. We need to keep some vacant lots, some big old hollow trees, some brush. We need the Country in the City, and the balm of the "accidental wild."

One woman who fully understood that was Lois Webster, a true naturalist and a teacher in my junior high whom (perversely) I never had for science but came to know well much later. Lois loved the Pawnee Grasslands and the mountain plovers, but she also loved the magpies and the cottonwoods of the city creeks and ditches. She helped me see why they matter so much to me. Lois died early in 1998, after many conservation honors. In co-dedicating this new edition of *The Thunder Tree* to her, I hope it will bring a few more folks to know the preciousness of what remains in the wildling fringes of our towns, to love and enjoy the natural fragments as Lois did, and to act to keep them present around us.

Only then can we trust that the silken touch of a butterfly's wing will always be possible, that the air will go sweet in spring with the balsam breath of cottonwoods.

—RMP

∞ PROLOGUE ∞

Everybody's Ditch

And in time there's no more telling which is which between them, no sharp distinction, no clear edge of difference where it can be said that here the land ends and here the man begins.

— Don Berry,
Trask

A GREEN RAVINE creases northeast Seattle, draining into Lake Union near the University of Washington. My mother grew up in a white shingle house beside this ravine and it became her constant haunt. Whenever she was able to return to Seattle, Mother's first impulse was to visit "her" ravine. On one of these pilgrimages she took me along, and I saw in her face the meaning of place. At Ravenna Park she made a personal connection that transformed the way she looked at the land for the rest of her life.

When people connect with nature, it happens *somewhere*. Almost everyone who cares deeply about the outdoors can identify a particular place where contact occurred. This may have been a wilderness, a national park, or a stretch of unbounded countryside, but more often the place that makes a difference is unspectacular: a vacant lot, a scruffy patch of woods, a weedy field, a stream, a green ravine like Ravenna — or a ditch.

My own point of intimate contact with the land was a ditch. Growing up on the wrong side of Denver to reach the mountains easily or often, I resorted to the tattered edges of the Great Plains

on the back side of town. There I encountered a century-old irrigation channel known as the High Line Canal. Without a doubt, most of the elements of my life flowed from that canal.

From the time I was six, this weedy watercourse had been my sanctuary, playground, and sulking walk. It was also my imaginary wilderness, escape hatch, and birthplace as a naturalist. Later the canal served as lover's lane, research site, and holy ground of solace. Over the years I studied its natural history, explored much of its length, watched its habitats shrink as the suburbs grew up around it, and tried to help save some of its best bits. Despite the losses, the High Line remained a place to which I would often return. Even when living in national parks, in exotic lands, in truly rural countryside, and in Seattle near Mother's ravine, I've hankered to get back to the old ditch whenever I could.

Around dry Denver, of course, the canal has many adherents. Since the public trail along the canal service road was opened in the seventies, tens of thousands have taken their pleasure there. But even before that, in the days of its unofficial access, I was not alone in finding it. A young woman named Laura Corliss wrote her "Study of the High Line Canal" for school in 1975, telling of her family's longtime dependence on the ditch for recreation. The Corlisses lived along the canal in Denver, between Eisenhower and Bible parks. Laura's dad, Charles, rafted significant portions of the canal, and his children tubed, biked, chased frogs and crawdads, swung, dived, and swam all summer long. It was all against water department rules, but "without the canal I don't know what I would have done," Laura told me, "or what growing up would have been like." She spoke for many kids and many ditches when she wrote, "During those hot and long summer days, I would have been bored stiff if it weren't for that High Line Canal."

It isn't difficult to find lovers of the High Line around Denver, but I've been surprised by the number of people from elsewhere who care for this particular ditch. Three women I've met in the

Pacific Northwest exemplify this phenomenon. Evelyn Iritani, a Seattle journalist whose father spent a lot of his time on the ditch when he lived near it in the forties, knows it through his tales. Ellen Lanier-Phelps, a land planner in Portland, gained her appreciation for urban greenspaces from growing up beside the canal in a Denver suburb. Norma Walker now lives in Ocean Park, Washington, near my home, but the High Line was her son's "safety net" when her family lived in Colorado and she was mayor of Aurora. I am no longer surprised when conversation comes around to a common affection for the High Line Canal.

Even if they don't know "my" ditch, most people I speak with seem to have a ditch somewhere — or a creek, meadow, woodlot, or marsh — that they hold in similar regard. These are places of initiation, where the borders between ourselves and other creatures break down, where the earth gets under our nails and a sense of place gets under our skin. They are the secondhand lands, the hand-me-down habitats where you have to look hard to find something to love.

This book is my love song to damaged lands, a serenade for all such places. I want to ask: What do shreds and scraps of the natural scene mean, after all, in the shadow of the citified whole? What can one patch of leftover land mean to one person's life, or to the lives of all who dwell in the postindustrial wasteland? In the end, this is not a book about *a* ditch. It is a book about everybody's ditch, and what Kim Stafford calls "weaving a rooted companionship with home ground."

The Thunder Tree is not a guidebook to the High Line Canal. Neither does it offer a complete chronicle of this venerable watercourse. There is a need for both types of books, which I hope will someday be satisfied. In the meantime, I trust that this very different book will awaken interest in places like the High Line in every community.

Nor is this a personal history. The ditch made the man, yet this is a memoir of a place, not a person. My life stories are

meant to illuminate the land, not the other way around. As for sequence, I agree with Vladimir Nabokov, writing in *Speak, Memory*: "I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip." Just as recollection and current events mingle in the stew of our awareness, history and happenstance trade places frequently in this narrative. Readers looking for a linear chronology will surely trip.

Instead, I have sought to draw a dense but light-permeable portrait of a changing countryside and the people who depend on it in different ways. The first part, "Lifeline," introduces the ditch through intense personal experience, follows it from top to bottom, and tells of the illimitable importance of water in the West. "Landmarks," the second part, examines the face of the near-urban countryside as a habitat for hope, change, and continuity. Part III, "City Limits," considers the consequences of growth when natural limitations are ignored. The last section, "Still Life," speaks of loss and what's left when trees, people, and landscapes pass from the scene. Leaflike, the book hopes to honor and emulate the woven canopy of the namesake tree.

Nearly forty years have elapsed since I first saw the High Line Canal. The landscape that so touched me has changed almost beyond recognition in those years — until I get down inside the ditch. Except for the proliferation of plastic among the flotsam in the bottom, the scene between the bank grass and the cottonwoods remains much the same as that which first enchanted me so long ago. As a ditchwalker in that silty bed, I have had none of the rights enjoyed by the farmers, no responsibilities such as the ditchriders bear — just the exercise of my free senses in company with the wind, the rain, and the place. What follows is my experience of that place.

It is through close and intimate contact with a particular patch of ground that we learn to respond to the earth, to see that it

really matters. We need to recognize the humble places where this alchemy occurs, and treat them as well as we treat our parks and preserves — or better, with less interference.

Everybody has a ditch, or ought to. For only the ditches — and the fields, the woods, the ravines — can teach us to care enough for all the land.