Kevin M. Anderson, Ph.D, Coordinator

Center for Environmental Research at Hornsby Bend

Austin Water — Clearly Reliable

MISSION

Urban Ecology and Sustainability

- Community
- Education
- Research

PARTNERS

- Austin Water Utility
- University of Texas
- Texas A&M University

RESEARCH AREAS

- Soil Ecology, Sewage Recycling and Reuse
- Hydrogeology of the Alluvial Aquifer
- Riparian Ecology and Restoration
- Avian Ecology

HBBO — Hornsby Bend Bird Observatory

Texas Riparian Association

Center for Environmental Research at Hornsby Bend

Austin WATER
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AWU-CER Lunchtime Lectures
September – December 2011

Each talk begins AT NOON Waller Center [625 East 10th Street – between I-35 and Red River] Room 104

The 1st Wednesday of the Month! Free and Open to the Public – bring a lunch and learn

Urban Nature and Urban Ecology: Understanding Urban Ecosystems

Over the next four months, we will explore different perspectives and issues of urban nature and ecology. We will begin in September by examining a range of perspectives on nature in the city, including urban ecology, urban planning, restoration ecology, political ecology, and more. In October, we will focus on the issue of officially sanctioned urban nature versus non-native intruders, and the different views of nature in the study of urban ecology. Focusing on urban planning in November, we will look at how nature is incorporated into the urban landscape and how it resists our planning. We will wrap up in December by assessing encounters with urban nature as revealed by urban nature writers.

September 7 Noon-1pm
Varieties of Possibility: Perspectives on Nature and the City

October 5 Noon-1pm
The Weeds and the Wild: Invasive Species and Urban Ecology

November 2 Noon-1pm
The Proper Place of Nature: Urban Planning and Urban Ecology

December 7 Noon-1pm
Encounters with Nature in the City: Urban Nature and Literature

Encounters with Nature in the City: Urban Nature and Literature

Kevin Michael Anderson, Ph.D.
Austin Water Utility – Center for Environmental Research

The Conceptual Framework

Language

We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.

- Edward Sapir (1949) *The Status of Linguistics as a Science*

Narratives, Stories, and Myths

Narratives form our reality. We become their vessels. Stories find, capture, and hold us. Our lives are shaped by the stories we hear as children; some fade as we grow older, others are reinforced by our families, churches, and schools. From stories we absorb our goals in life, our morals, and our patterns of behavior.

- Carolyn Merchant (2003) *Reinventing Eden*

Metaphor

We evolve, so to speak, through metaphor: one day the world is respoken, and a new being is released. Whether or not we have reached this point, whether there actually is the possibility of a re-imagining of things, we cannot know: perhaps our constant mass-media chatter is sufficient to drown out any rival vocabularies.

- Neil Evernden (1992) *The Social Creation of Nature*

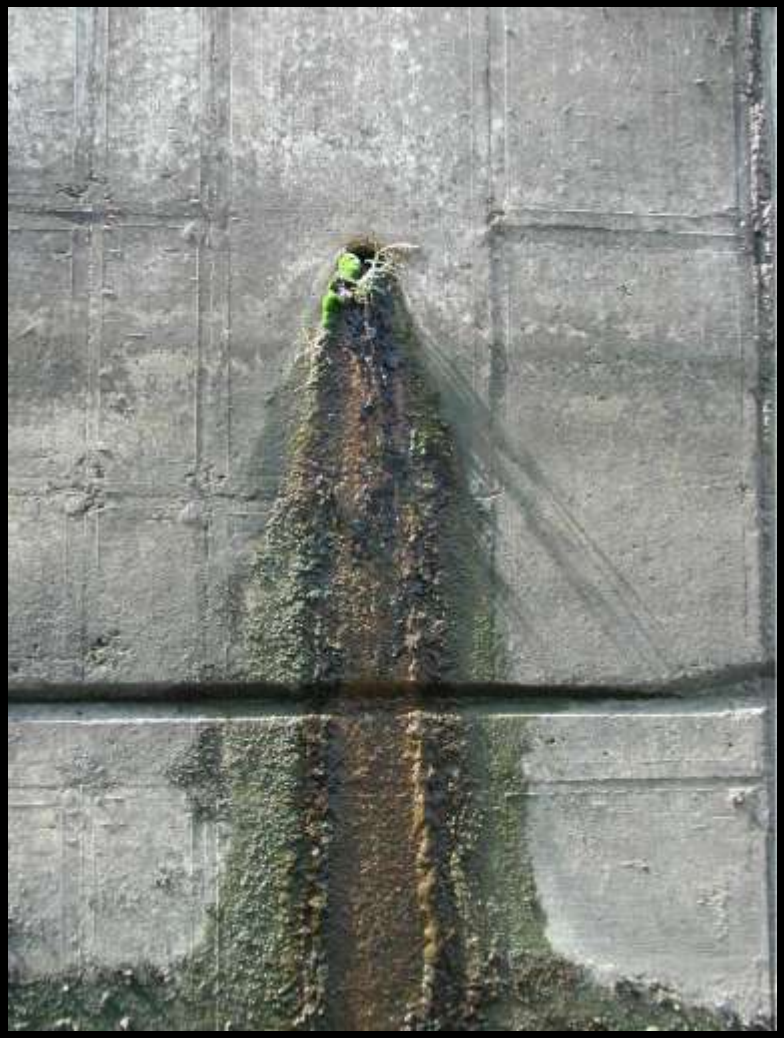
Varieties of Possibility – Narratives of Nature

Iterative natures – First and Second Nature

First Nature and Culture

Oh, how great and divinely limiting is the wisdom of walls. This Green Wall is, I think, the greatest invention ever conceived. Man ceased to be a wild animal the day he built the first wall; Man ceased to be a wild man only on the day when the Green Wall was completed, when, by this wall we isolated our machine-like, perfect world from the irrational, ugly world of trees, birds, and beasts.

- Eugene Zamyatin, *We* (1921)



Second Nature – the transformation of first nature

Positive and Negative Narratives

From Pastoral Arcadia

Cicero *De natura deorum (45BC)*

We enjoy the fruits of the plains and of the mountains, the rivers and the lakes are ours, we sow corn, we plant trees, we fertilize the soil by irrigation, we confine the rivers and straighten or divert their courses. In fine, by means of our hands we essay to create as it were a second world within the world of nature.

to Urban Decay

Henri Lefebvre *The Production of Space* (1974)

Nature, destroyed as such, has already had to be reconstructed at another level, the level of "second nature" i.e. the town and the urban. The town, anti-nature or non-nature and yet second nature, heralds the future world, the world of the generalized urban. Nature, as the sum of particularities which are external to each other and dispersed in space, dies. It gives way to produced space, to the urban.

The British Romantic Concept of Nature and American Transcendentalists

The Romantic period, begins in 1798, the year of the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and Coleridge. For the Romantics, Nature was closer to a spiritual experience, a natural religion of the sublime, as opposed to traditional institutionalized religion. Romantic "nature" is a vehicle for self-consciousness. The Romantics' preoccupation with natural phenomena amounts to a search for the true self, for one's real identity.

The concept of the spirituality of Nature is thoroughly explored in Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, "Nature" (1844).

For example, throughout "Song of Myself," Whitman makes a practice of presenting commonplace items in nature--"ants," "heap'd stones," and "poke-weed"--as containing divine elements, and he refers to the "grass" as a natural "hieroglyphic," "the handkerchief of the Lord."

Thoreau's *Walden*

Nature is a source of sensations--healthy feelings. It is therapy for a diseased, overcivilized heart. Humans can discover emotional health in nature. Such health leads to moral and spiritual clarity.

Nature is a refuge from the artificial constructs of civilization

In the United States, the foundational narratives of Nature that we celebrate are wilderness and pastoral arcadia.

They are the foundational metaphors of American nature from which we assess the value of nature in America.

However, we are now predominately a country of urbanites who have only occasional contact with wilderness or pastoral nature.

Our understanding of what constitutes “official” urban nature in cities is shaped by culturally dominant metaphors of nature.

These metaphors valorize urban nature that is either deliberately cultivated in parks and gardens or formally protected as remnants of native landscapes obliterated by the creation of the city in preserves, sanctuaries, and refuges.

In American cities, we perceive nature in the urban landscape filtered through concepts that prejudge its ecological and cultural value.

First Nature - Wilderness and the Wild

The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the world. Every tree sends its fibers forth in search of the Wild.

-Henry David Thoreau, "Walking"

Wilderness is the natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover the true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives. Most of all, it is the ultimate landscape of authenticity. Combining the sacred grandeur of the sublime with the primitive simplicity of the frontier, it is the place where we can see the world as it really is, and so know ourselves as we really are – or ought to be.

William Cronon "The Trouble with Wilderness or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature"
in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature [1995]*

Are Wildness and Wilderness the same?

Narrative of Redemptive Urban Nature

This narrative presupposes the framework of iterative natures with preserves, parks, and gardens established for imaginative urban landscapes of wild first nature and pastoral second nature. The further presupposition is that the urban industrial second nature is degradation in need of redemption.

Saint Henry – the complete quote – "The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the world. Every tree sends its fibers forth in search of the Wild. The cities import it at any price."

-Henry David Thoreau, "Walking"

The narrative of redemptive urban nature is the story of nature which is deliberately incorporated into urban design as a tonic for body and spirit. Space for nature is created to provide recreation for physical health and to allow contact with officially sanctioned nature for mental health in parks and gardens and by the creation of preserves, sanctuaries, and refuges.

Are we importing wildness or wilderness or what?

Narrative of Restorative Urban Nature

Design with Nature - One version of this narrative focuses on urban design and landscape architecture, and Ian McHarg is the main protagonist.

This urban design version of the restoration narrative emerges from a positive view of cooperation with nature and pastoral ideals of improvement of urban ecosystems.

It is based on a scientific, mechanistic manipulation of nature for our own ends to produce "green space" that is valued both for its ecological function and its aesthetic appeal.

Urban Restoration Ecology - The restoration narrative has another version which has focused almost exclusively on the recovery of native habitats through the restoration of these habitats in urban landscapes.

Restoration ecology developed along side of conservation biology as a proactive technique not to just conserve remnant habitats and species but to actively restore degraded ecosystems.

In this version of the narrative of restorative urban nature, the trangressive weeds especially non-native species must be eradicated because they are disruptive aliens. The most controversial of these aliens are invasive species.

We need to embrace the full continuum of a natural landscape that is also cultural, in which the city, the suburb, the pastoral, and the wild each has its proper place, which we permit ourselves to celebrate without needlessly denigrating the others.

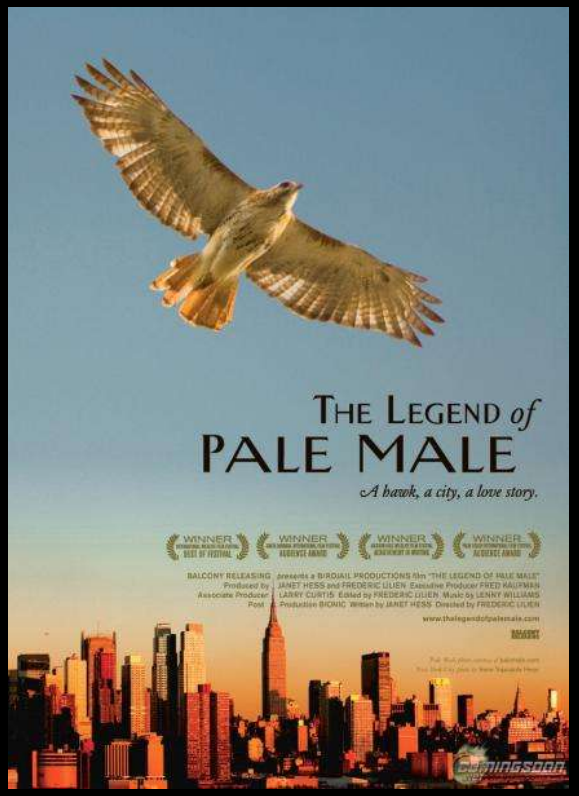
William Cronon "The Trouble with Wilderness or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature" in *Uncommon Ground (1995)*

Urban Wildlife

Urban fauna is judged favorably when it in some way fulfills our expectations of wild or pastoral nature or condemned as pestilent when it fails to follow the narrative for good fauna in the city.

This narrative of urban wildlife declares that everyday non-charismatic house sparrows, grackles, and pigeons are urban pests that further degrade the city…

but nesting red-tailed hawks and peregrine falcons
are redemptive wild additions to the urban scene.



Winn, *Red-Tails In Love: A Wildlife Drama in Central Park* (1998)

At least three children's illustrated books about Pale Male have been published, including:

- *The Tale of Pale Male: a True Story*, by Jeanette Winter (Harcourt, 2007)
- *City Hawk: the Story of Pale Male*, by Meghan McCarthy (Simon & Schuster, 2007)
- *Pale Male: Citizen Hawk of New York City*, by Janet Schulman (Knopf, 2008)

Pale Male is the mascot of P.S. 6, an elementary school at the Upper East Side, Manhattan.

Pale Male the famous redtail hawk
Performs wingstands high above midtown Manhattan
Circles around for one last pass over the park
Got his eye on a fat squirrel down there and a couple of pigeons
They got no place to run they got no place to hide
But Pale Male he's cool, see 'cause his breakfast ain't goin' nowhere
So he does a loop t loop for the tourists and the six o'clock news
Got him a penthouse view from the tip-top of the food chain, boys
He looks up and down on fifth avenue and says "God I love this town"
But life goes on down here below
And all us mortals struggle so
We laugh and cry
And live and die
That's how it goes
For all we know
Down here below

Pale male swimmin' in the air
Looks like he's in heaven up there
People sufferin' everywhere
But he don't care
But life goes on down here below
And all us mortals, struggle so
We laugh and cry

- Steve Earle

All of the city as Open Space

We can imagine Pale Male as an agent making his way through the city picking off squirrels and courting and nesting while New Yorkers line up below to watch. He is an active subject intentionally using the city, rather than simply a passive object shuttled about in flows of urban metabolism.

The mobility of urban wildlife like birds and large mammals allows them to exploit the entire city as habitat.

This kind of ironic perspective on urban wildlife, with a bird more at home in the city than the suffering humans down below, suggests the possibilities for reinterpreting narratives of nature from the vantage point of the whole city as habitat.

Beautiful flower in your garden
But the most beautiful by far
Is the one growing wild in the garbage dump
Even here, even here, we are

Song by Paul Westerberg, “Even Here We Are” (*14 Songs*, 1993)



Other Types of Urban Spaces

Wastelands - whole patches

- Vacant lots
- Dumpsites
- Industrial Wasteland
  - Brownfields
  - Greenfields
  - Quarries and Gravel Pits
- Urban Infrastructure Land
  - Power plants
  - Water treatment plants
  - Reservoirs
  - Wastewater treatment plants
    - Sewage ponds
    - Constructed wetlands
  - Stormwater retention structures
- Unusable Land - bits and pieces
  - Slopes, gullies, corners, fragments

Margins – edges and ledges

- Urban waterways
- Canals, drainage channels
- Utility corridors
- Waysides
  - road waysides
  - railway verges
- Alleys – paved, unpaved, grass
- Walkways and pathways
- Fencelines
- Walls and ledges
- Pillars and bridge abutments






The High Line – New York

Putting Vacant Lots into Perspective

The City of Pittsburgh has no easy way of categorizing its vacant land. In fact, there is no one unifying definition used throughout the city. In some databases, vacant land means any land without a structure. Other databases classify it as any structure or parcel with no residents. There is no database that easily defines vacant land (no structure) that is un-maintained and not part of a right of way or park. Most of this variety of vacant land, (estimated between 6,000 and 12,000 lots), is symptomatic of communities with high levels of disinvestment, absentee landlords, and underserved low income residents. Vacant land can also be a cause, however, of many negative characteristics associated with urban blight. Thus, un-maintained spaces in the midst of urban communities create a vicious circle that many communities do not have resources to address.

Negative Influences, Positive Opportunities

A growing body of statistical research revolving around vacant lot issues in urban areas point toward direct, empirical correlations between vacancy and a variety of negative economic, environmental, and social influences. Thankfully, there is a flip side - equally strong evidence that reversing vacancy leads to stronger, healthier neighborhoods.

Negative Influences of Vacant Lots

The impact of vacant lots reaches beyond visual blight and decay, negatively affecting communities across economic, environmental, and social bounds.

Economic Influences

A study of vacant lots in Philadelphia estimated that the city and closely related public agencies spent $1.8 million annually on cleaning vacant lots.

Neighborhood blocks with higher concentration of unmanaged vacant lots decreased property values by close to 18% (Wachter, The Wharton School)

Environmental Influences

Vacant Lots are targets for litter, illegal dumping, and criminal activity.

Security Influences

The City of Richmond, Virginia found that of all the economic and demographic variables tested, vacant properties had the highest correlation to the incidence of crime. (The National Vacant Properties Campaign)

Positive Influences through Greening Strategies

Strategies that address vacant land through green means are proven to have positive effects on communities in economically feasible ways.

Economic Influences

Cleaning and greening of vacant lots can increase adjacent property values by as much as 30% (Wachter, The Wharton School)

Planting a tree within 50 feet of a house can increase its value by about 9% (Wachter, The Wharton School)

Location of a house within ¼ mile from a park increased property values by 10% (Wachter, The Wharton School)

Vacant properties located near newly constructed parks were the first to sell during a revitalization project in North Philadelphia. (Philadelphia Green - Urban Impact)

Health & Recreation Influences

When people have access to parks, they exercise more. Access to places for physical activity leads to a 25.6% increase in the percentage of people exercising on three or more days a week (Trust for Public Land)

Ruinous Attractions – Social Space

Many waste places have these ruinous attractions: release from control, free play for action and fantasy, rich and varied sensations. Thus children are attracted to vacant lots, scrub woods, back alleys, and unused hillsides…those screened, marginal, uncontrolled places where people can indulge in behavior that is proscribed and yet not harmful to others – are regularly threatened by clean-ups and yet are a necessity for supple society.

- Kevin Lynch *Wasting Away* (1990) p. 26.

Natural History

Gilbert White (1720 – 1793)

The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne (1789)
shortened to *The Natural History of Selborne* in later additions

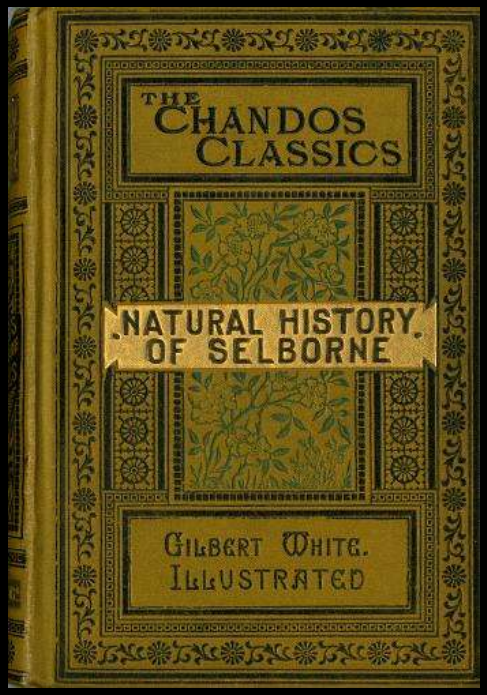
This book was a compilation of 44 of his letters to Thomas Pennant, the leading British zoologist of the day, and 66 letters to the Hon. Daines Barrington, an English barrister and another Fellow of the Royal Society.

Beginning in 1767, White detailed through these letters the natural history of the area around his family home at the vicarage of Selborne in Hampshire.

Almost 300 editions of the book have been published since 1789.

White was a careful observer relying on his own observations rather than folklore and common knowledge. For example, he realized that there were not one but three British species of "willow-wren" which are now known as the Chiffchaff, Willow Warbler and Wood Warbler.

One of his few errors paradoxically arises from his meticulous observation. Because Swallows and House Martins were seen so late in the year, often into November, he was convinced that at least some must hibernate through the winter rather than migrate.



1879 edition

Urban Natural History 1940s and 1950s

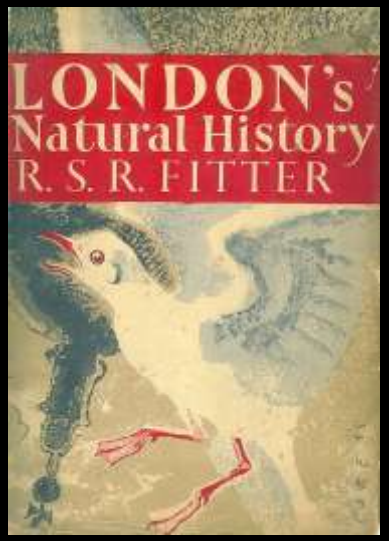
Robert Fitter, *London's Natural History* (1945)
John Kieran, *A Natural History of* New York (1959)
[both books include sewage ponds, waysides, and other habitats as part of their natural histories]

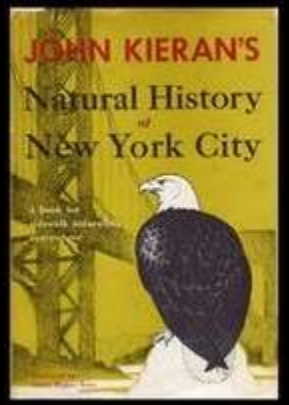
A naturalist's perspective of the city and discover a richness of flora and fauna usually overlooked in the everyday landscape of the city.

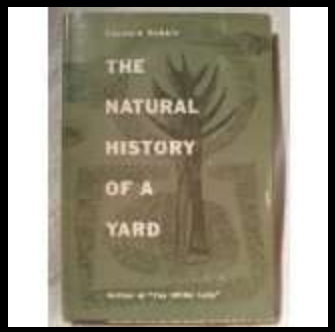
These books are survey accounts of native and non-native flora and fauna combined with environmental history.

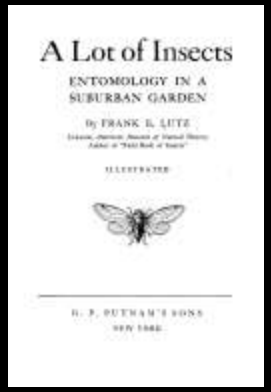
The place-based particularity of some natural history accounts of urban and suburban sites reveal a similar openness to all the organisms making home in these everyday places.

Popular natural history accounts of particular suburban backyards, like Lutz *Lot of Insects: Entomology of a Suburban Yard* (1941) and Dubkin *The Natural History of a Yard* (1953) were published in the 1940's and 1950's, and they focused on all the insects and wildlife found there and not just native species.







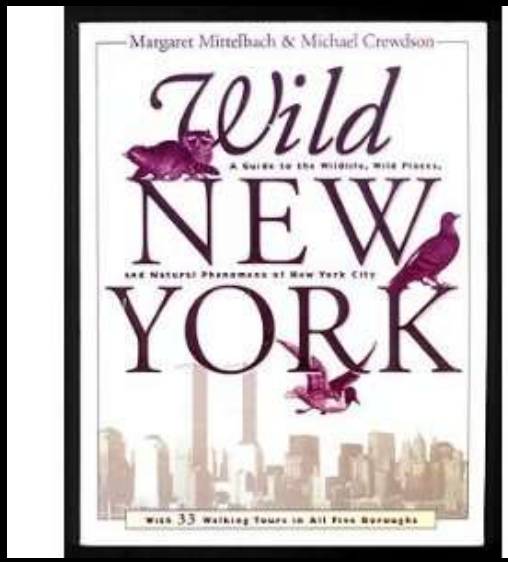


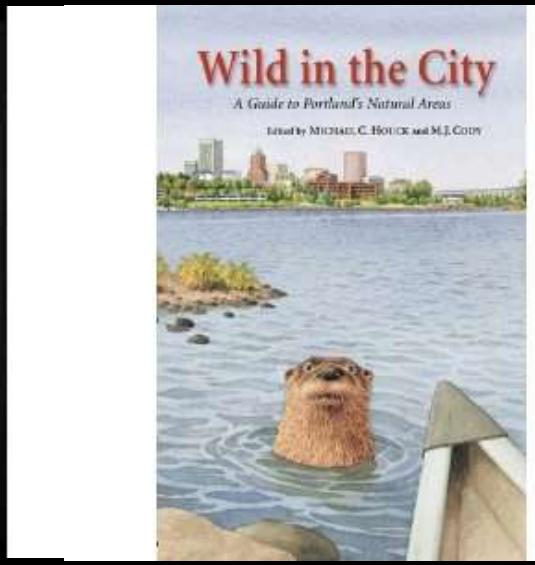
Contemporary Urban Natural History – Wild in the City

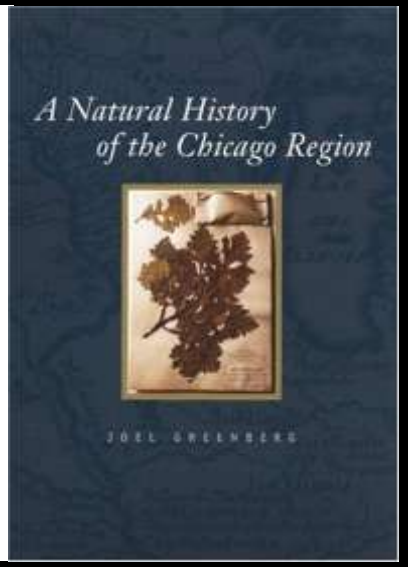
More recent natural histories of cities focus on native biodiversity.

They are written by native species advocates who exclude or demonize non-native species in their account of appropriate nature in the city.

The habitats that they celebrate tend to be remnant habitats within the city, rather than the whole of the urban landscape.







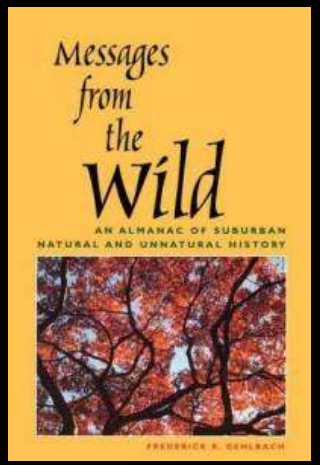
The Natural and the Unnatural

Among contemporary place-based natural history accounts, Gehlbach's *Messages from the Wild: An Almanac of Suburban Natural and Unnatural History (2002)* stands out as a long-term engagement with nature in a suburban ravine on the edge of Waco, Texas. Gehlbach bases the book on decades of observations, since he has lived near the ravine since the 1960s.

Gehlbach is a biologist who structures the book, as a classic natural history journal stretching across a year, with the conventions of natural history writing observed with seasonal change monitored and species names listed.

Gehlbach's book focuses mostly on native species and a sharp contrast is drawn between the "natural and unnatural." For him, the natural is native species that would have inhabited the undamaged ravine before European settlement, and the unnatural is the non-native species found there now as the result of human disturbance.

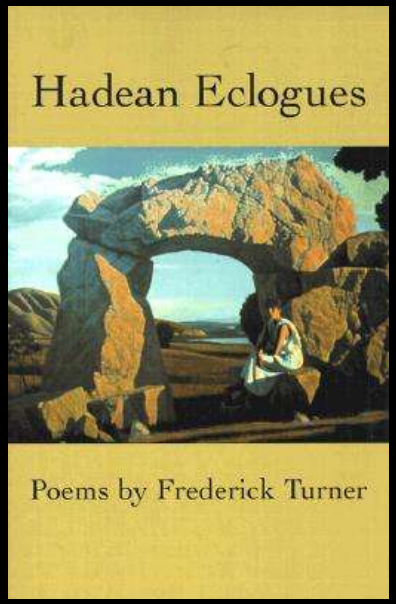
However, the book is more a celebration than a lament, as he details seasonal change and the diverse nonhuman occupancy of his suburban ravine.

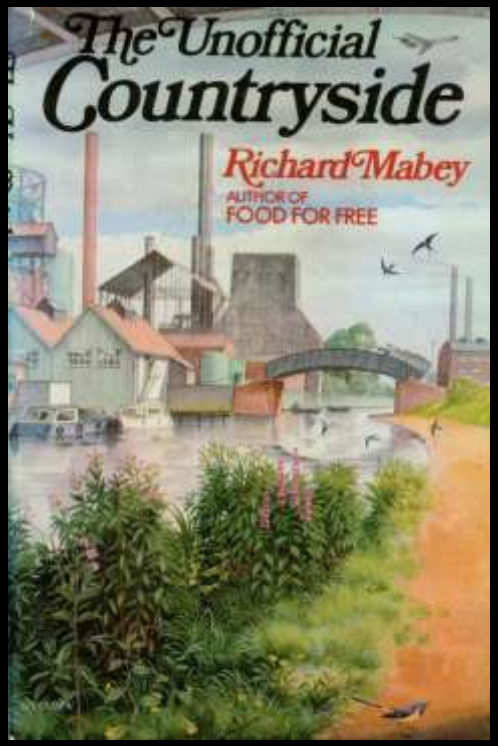


Not Even Natural – What is urban nature?

This is the landscape that nobody wants. It's my cup of rejection:
Driven to this unformed scraggly ignored backlot, this not-quite
Prairie, not-quite thicket, not even natural corner of
Texas, the hardscrabble left butt of a demoralized nation,
It is my choice and my pleasure to cherish this haphazard wilderness.
No, it's not even "wild" – it's a neglected product of artifice.
Come, let us walk by an improvised lakeshore, be given a vision:
Beaches of black dust, beautiful white ghosts, this drowned forest…

- Frederick Turner, first stanza "Texas Eclogue" in *Hadean Eclogues* (1999)





The Unofficial Countryside Richard Mabey (1973)

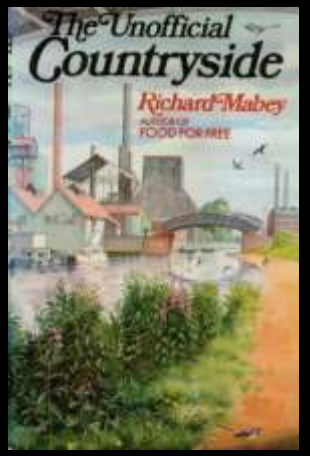
"I have called it the unofficial countryside because none of these places is in the countryside proper, nor were they ever intended to provide bed and board for wildlife.

They are all habitats which have grown out of human need. This is a scrappy definition, I know, covering everything from a planned suburban playground to the accidentally green corner of a city-centre parking lot.

Yet I think all these places do have one quality in common, and that is that, in them, the labels 'urban' and 'rural' by which we normally find our bearings in a landscape, just do not apply.

It is not the parks but the railway sidings that are thick with wild flowers."

Biological Slumming and Natural History



The book is structured like a classic natural history text about a year of exploring urban nature in London, England.

The conventions of natural history writing are observed with seasonal change monitored and species names listed.

However, since this is not the pastoral nature of Gilbert White's *Selborne*, Richard Mabey is forced to assess the ecological and cultural value of this urban nature on his exploratory rambles.

"The medium is an account of a year in the unofficial countryside, based chiefly around my personal observations and experiences…the danger in this approach is being tempted into some biological slumming. The habitats I've described in this book are in no way a substitute for the official countryside. Nor are they something to be cherished in their own right, necessarily. The last thing I want to do is to excuse the dereliction, the shoddiness and the sheer wastefulness of much of our urban landscape."

This apology for his biological slumming is in tension with his attraction to unofficial countryside

"It is amazing how romantic these pockets of ragamuffin greenery can begin to seem, nestling, like Frances Burnett's *Secret Garden*, behind the factory walls."

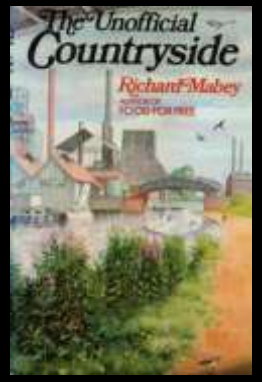
Ruinous Attractions and British Romantic Tradition

"Our attitude towards nature is a strangely contradictory blend of romanticism and gloom. We imagine it to 'belong' in those watercolour landscapes where most of us would also like to live."

However, Mabey also employs the Romantic Tradition and the redemption narrative of nature , arguing that unofficial countryside is a cheering reminder of the power of nature to persist amidst urban rubble and grime,

"For it is nature's fight back which is such an inspiration, her dogged and inventive survival in the face of all that we deal out. It is a survival story, and what it can mean for us, that is the subject of this book."

"If the ability of wildlife to survive literally on our doorsteps is remarkable, its persistence in the face of this ceaseless change is amazing. It is also, I find, amazingly cheering. For it is a bleak view to see this story as nothing more than one of survival, with Nature irrevocably opposed to Man, forever just holding on. Looked at more hopefully it is a story of co-existence, of how it is possible for the natural world to live alongside man, even amongst his grimiest eyesores."



American Urban Nature Writing

The discourse of American urban nature literature is also dominated by the narrative of restoration of urban nature through the protection and restoration of native species and habitats.

The discursive challenge for writers who are attracted to the whole of the urban landscape is to find language that celebrates the attractiveness weeds and their lifeworlds.

Like Mabey, these writers struggle with whether this nature is something to be cherished in its own right.

With apologies for biological slumming, these writers find themselves drawn to such rogue habitats, but they grow preoccupied with the literary effort of reconciling their attraction to urban nature with their commitment to the foundational myths of wilderness and pastoral nature.

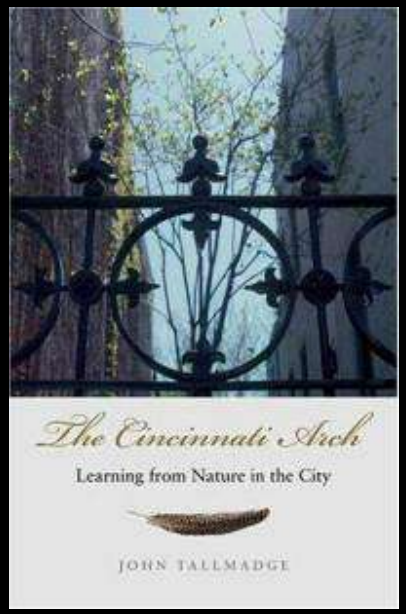
Literally, they struggle to come to terms with this type of nature, that is, to enclose urban nature within traditional rhetorical boundaries of nature in American literature.

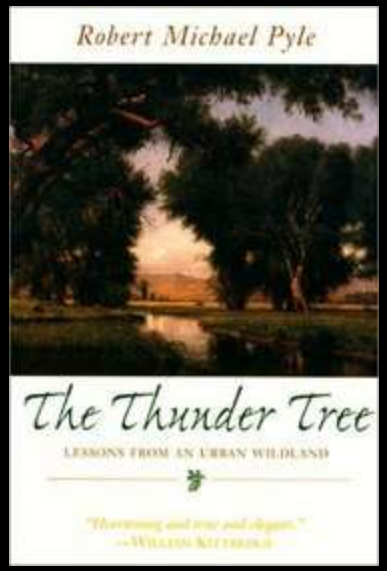
Not a Real Ecosystem - John Tallmadge
The Cincinnati Arch: Learning from Nature in the City (2004)

Urban nature is not sublime…There's too much sterility in the form of roofs and pavement, and, oddly enough, there's also too much wildness, too many weeds and wooded borders and tangled banks, not to mention vacant lots going to brush.

Of course, "wilderness" won't do to describe such landscapes either. Despite the degree of wildness, there's too much human impact, too many alien species, too few large animals to meet the legal and cultural criteria.

The fact is that urban landscapes are just too mixed up, chaotic, and confused to fit our established notions of beauty and value in nature. … *Maybe it's not really nature at all, not a real ecosystem, just a bunch of weeds and exotics mixed up with human junk.*





The Balm of the Accidental Wilds
– Robert Michael Pyle, *The Thunder Tree (1993)*

"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?"

Robert Michael Pyle accepts Mabey's invitation to explore the wastelands, and he reveals that his childhood secret garden was a weedy drainage canal on the edge of Denver, Colorado to which he has returned throughout his life in order to renew his connection to nature.

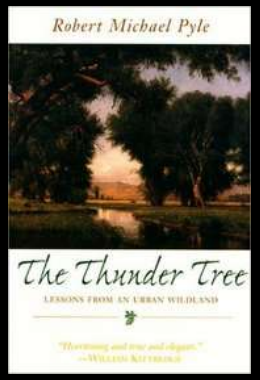
"More and more, we are discovering that the authentic wilderness of the mountains and deserts, though essential, is not enough to provide for a largely urban and overbloated population of humans. We need to keep some vacant lots, some big old hollow trees, some brush.

We need the Country in the City, the balm of the "accidental wild." "

Pyle acknowledges Mabey's precedence in writing about these places, and deliberately juxtaposes Mabey's metaphor of country in the city with his own rhetorical inventions based on American metaphors of nature.

He utilizes a strategy that mirrors Mabey's contrast between official and unofficial countryside. From the start he acknowledges that the authenticity of wilderness is central to American sensibilities about what counts as nature but then he celebrates the "accidental wilds"

Pathway to nature conservation?



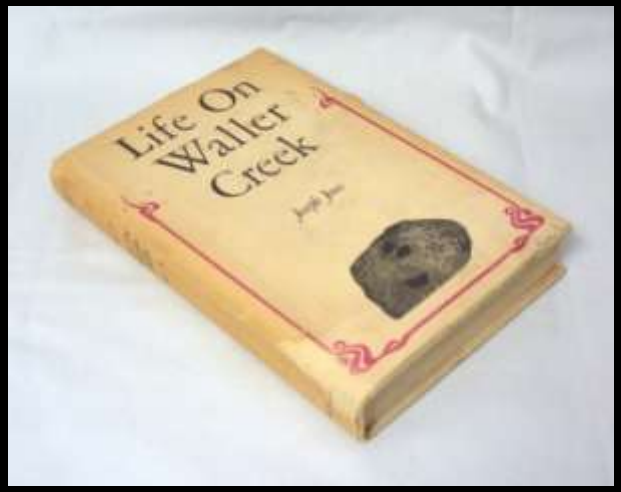
Although he acknowledges a lesser status for marginal nature, Pyle does not apologize for his cherishing this degraded habitat. In fact, Pyle expresses no sense of guilt and no worry over whether his encounter with this nature is biological slumming.

However, as his metaphors signal, the appreciation of the accidental wild must support the agenda of environmentalism and lead urbanites to become conservationists.

The crux of his argument is that this conversion can best come through unmediated contact with urban nature in nearby places. However, these places need to remain free from official interpretation and supervision so that they retain a sense of openness and democracy of engagement,

"Parks are normally too manicured and chemically treated to offer much of interest to the adventuring youngster. And as for nature reserves, they might as well be paved over for all they offer in the way of boundless exploration. For special places to work their magic on kids, they need to be able to do some clamber and damage. They need to be free to climb trees, muck about, catch things, and get wet—above all, to leave the trail. Such activities are normally proscribed in reserves and for good reason. I support the strict protection of natural areas wherever possible, for the careful perpetuation and management of scarce elements of diversity. But the unofficial countryside—the domain of unsupervised outdoor play—needs to be recognized and protected among the built landscape, as well as the official preserves."

Pyle does not recognize the tension between official nature conservation focused only on native species and the cosmopolitan community of the accidental wild.



Engaged Encounter

– Joseph Jones, *Life on Waller Creek* (1982)

"Forty years and more I have packed my lunch to Waller Creek. Only since retirement, though, have I felt I had time to spend undertaking small improvements along its rugged banks: ephemeral gestures to be sure, but good for body and spirit alike – an hour or so, three or four days a week, before lunch. Instead of going up the wall I go down to the Creek."

In this unassuming way, Joseph Jones begins *Life On Waller Creek*, his extraordinary account of a trash-filled urban creek in Austin, Texas which he characterizes as a "Cretaceous limestone gutter."

The stretch of creek adopted by Jones runs through the campus of the University of Texas. Every day for over 50 years, Professor Jones would come down to the creek from his office in the English Department to eat his lunch and explore the creek.

At one level, this book is a standard natural history of a stream with its limestone bed speckled with fossils anchoring the geological timescale of the history and framing the timeline of biological occupancy. At another level, the book is about 50 years of engagement with a place like White's Selborne which included both nature and human artifacts.

Two aspects of this book set it apart from the previous texts.

Constructive Meddling

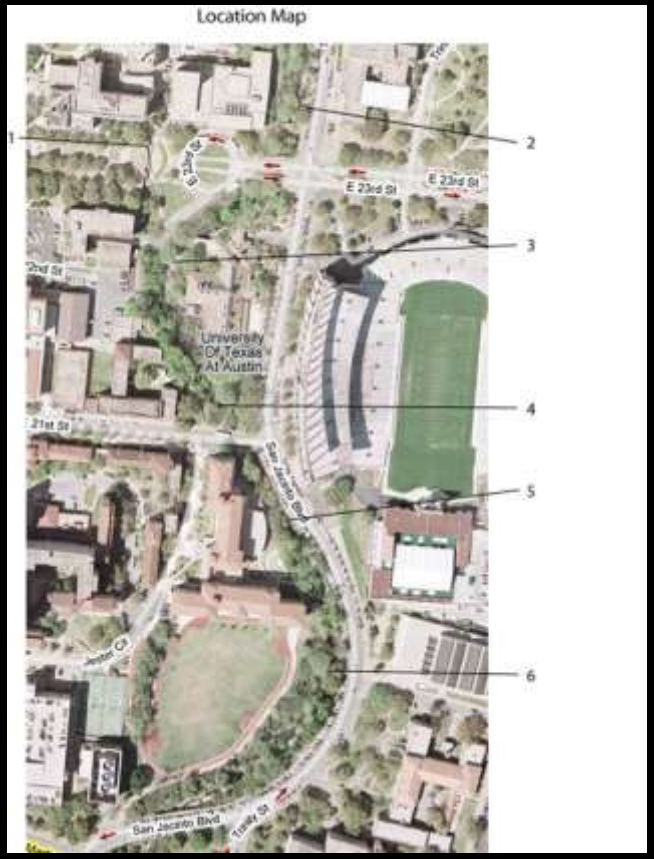
First, Jones does not just go to the creek in search of redemptive encounters with wild nature like Mabey, Pyle, or Tallmadge.

Unlike Tallmadge, he does not ask the creek to redeem the degradation of the urban nature.

Like Pyle, he writes about a place that he knows intimately and, although he makes an argument for its conservation, he presents himself as an engaged observer and unapologetic meddler in this place. Everyday Jones putters around in the creek bed maintaining informal trails and collecting various bits of interesting natural and manmade detritus.

Unlike Mabey, Pyle, and Tallmadge, Jones engages this place not as just a site for the observation of nature but as an encounter through constructive meddling.

This kind of limited, engaged meddling contrasts with the wholesale transformation of wastelands and margins that occurs when they are declared open space or nature preserves.



Inventories

The second aspect of this book which sets it apart is, perhaps, a more radical departure from the conventions of narratives of nature than anything envisioned by the new geographers of nature.

In his journals, Jones kept a record of each day's visit to the creek with detailed observations of what he saw there.

Where the conventional expectation is that these catalogues would be a naturalist's observations of nature, Jones was not a naturalist, but rather an engaged literate observer encountering a marginal urban place.

He carefully records what he sees and experiences without censuring the detritus of the urban landscape in favor of redemptive moments of nature.

He calls these lists of prosaic observations "Inventories," and they are interspersed throughout the text like phenomenological snapshots of the place.

Inventory

If what has been tagged “Inventory” – appearing sporadically at numerous places throughout the rest of this book – strikes the reader as contemporary intrusion into the concerns of the past, so be it.

The past intrudes on us; why shouldn’t we exercise our right of reciprocity? But I hope it may suggest more than intrusion, a feeling of continuity outside either past or present, strictly viewed.

The Creek is an ever-visible manifestation of continuity, of life; the amount and nature of what it carries along, in addition to its variable current of water, keeps changing; the bed is hardly the same from one day (or even hour) to the next, though the variations are normally undramatic.

Besides being part of the landscape, as one of the most active agents of landscape-making, it is the sum total that it has been interfered with by man, and continues to be interfered with, must be accepted as part of such total process, whatever opinion may be held as to the merits of the interferences, including certain sandbars, eddies, and transitory whirlpools in the writer’s mind, commingled with less perishable small events in nature.

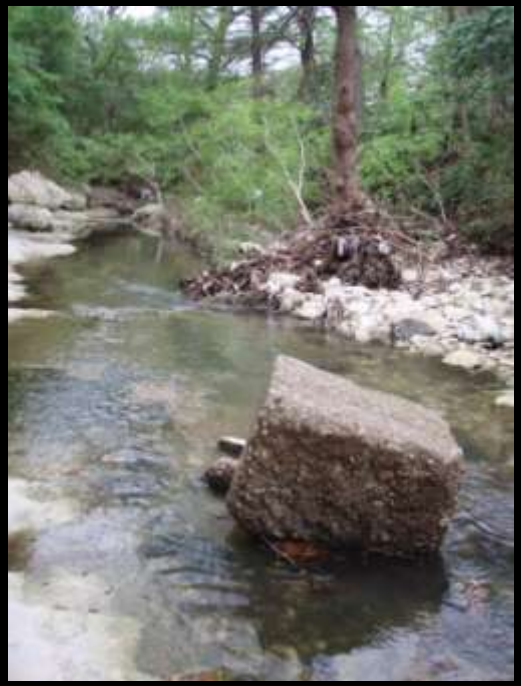
In italic passages, then, the casual, the accidental, the wayward all have a little more scope than straight narrative will stoop to tolerate.

I would hope also that the reader, if he should tire of being reminded overmuch of what an efficient trash-receiver (up to a point) the Creek has become in our day, will exercise the reader's privilege of imagining what counterparts to an inventory of the 1970s-80s were almost certainly to be found in Waller Creek pretty steadily after 1839 and indeed even before.

But let him first accept himself as part of the continuum and become his own short-term archeologist: such fugitive creek-things as I will be cataloguing here, when carried and buried, might be thought of as archeology going somewhere to happen.

Thus, for example:

Plastic beer cups (Brand X with blue map of Texas) in addition to the ever-ongoing deposit of beer cans…A grackle's reflection as he flies low over a still pool…After a flood, young willows keep reminding us, for many days, "It went that-a-way,"…High-visibility translucent bluish plastic bags – like Portuguese-men-of-war on a Gulf beach, but not biodegradable…scars of the sewer builders, still evident after twenty, twenty-five years…A much-twisted-and-battered yellow umbrella.



Inventory

A closer-mechanism for a metal casement window (not in operating order) …

The name "Billy" neatly scratched with a stick through the algae onto the Creek bottom…

A sky-blue tin lid, decorated with gold trim and other fancywork: American Louis XIV…

Roots projecting straight out from between strata at the base of a cliff, groping for water: what trunk do they feed, at what distance?...

The patriarchal pecan tree on the west bank a few rods south of the Drama Building, sometimes called "Old Geronimo," has seen not only the days of Geronimo himself but probably everybody and everything else in Texas history, and much more. Now slowly dying back, what a life it has had! …

A rusty bucket-bottom caught through one of its holes on a ragweed stub, two feet up…

Dandelions and some other yellow flowers are out on sunny days in early January…

I'm almost as glad to see readers on the Creek bank as I am to see longear sunfish in the pools…

A pink plastic spoon.

Inventory

A yellow candy-wrapper…
Plastic bottle for duplicator ink…
Half a cement block…

and from masses of radiant leaves the grackles, no longer wheezing out half-whistles, would carol hymns of glory to God in seraphic harmonies; and the palpable elements of water, earth, and air would blend with the fire of such vision that, at essence lifted clear of its engagement with space and time, the many would coalesce and cohere and rejoice at one. Maybe they do already and we can't perceive it; but then even if we could, who would believe us? ...

A largish sheet-metal cylinder, very rusty…
Cypress needles help traction, too, on a slippery bank.

Traction is the best metaphor for what Jones gives us with grackles, cypress needles and a yellow candy-wrapper.

His inventories have the specificity and immediacy to reflect the phenomenological complexity of Waller Creek.

They are like prose poems that embody the scattershot encounters with the ever changing assemblages of natural and manmade detritus gathered by the creek.

Most importantly, Jones demonstrates with them that he does not look beyond this particular place, this limestone gutter, for redemptive meaning.

They document the labor of his hands and all those decades of meddling with the creek and harvesting insights about appropriate occupation with inappropriate nature in the margins.

In doing so, he demonstrates another practice for engaging urban nature.

Jones does not require wilderness to redeem the city.

In this way, he suggests a move beyond the dependence on traditional narratives of nature toward the beginnings of a new, more open narrative of nature, which is, to answer Mabey, necessarily worthy of cherishing in its own right.

Human Agency and the Agency of Nature

Coproduction and Marginal Nature

The agency of marginal nature is a more collective undertaking, a gathering of nonhumans in a collaborative project to make home in a particular place in the city.

The less mobile members of marginal nature do not have the ability to elude the human interventions of restorationists or environmental managers, and so they take advantage of opportunities to flourish in neglected spaces.

Soon the community has begun to gather and the coproduction of marginal nature has begun.


Applause


Questions?