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Book Reviews

MARSHES-IN PHOTOS AND WORDS

Marshes: The Disappearing Edens. Bill Burt. 2007. Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut. \$35.00 (cloth).

Bill Burt has done it again. The author of two superbly illustrated books (*Shadowbirds* and *Rare and Elusive Birds of North America*) that were reviewed earlier in this journal, Burt has returned with another excellent book, this one focusing on marshes.

Like his earlier books, *Marshes* features wonderful close-up views of many hard-to-photograph birds. Here, in addition, are grand images of marsh landscapes and other marsh denizens, especially plants. Burt best characterizes his own book, which he intends as “an evocation and exploration, rather than a catalog of marshland life.” He tells of his 30 years spent prowling marshes of all kinds, all over North America, day and night alike. His books display some of the results of his searches, both in word and wondrous photography.

Burt ranges widely in his searches for marshes. Each of the seven chapters focuses on a marsh, or an area with marshes. He starts with his “home” marsh, in Connecticut. Then to Maryland and its Elliot Island marsh, then a fen near Douglas, Manitoba. One chapter touches on marshes of the southern Atlantic and Gulf coasts, where he finds pleasure in the saltmarshes of Virginia and New Jersey, and wonders why the people of Louisiana seem oblivious to the marshy pageantry that surrounds them.

The West largely disappoints Burt. He notes that historically large wetland basins, such as Klamath and Malheur in California and Oregon, while still supporting impressive numbers of birds, have been greatly reduced in size, due to “reclamation”—drainage, diversion, and irrigation. The Central Valley of California once had a third of its surface covered with water, but now the remaining wetlands are restricted to a string of national wildlife refuges. And wetlands at those sites tend to be square and even elevated, so a visitor can view the hoards of waterfowl at eye level. Despite the loss and alteration of wetlands, millions of waterfowl in the Pacific Flyway still pack into the Central Valley, possibly because they have nowhere else to go.

At Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Montana, Burt takes the auto tour and learns that the Bureau of Reclamation “rescued” a drying marsh by providing return irrigation flows to the wetland—water with toxic metals, pesticides, and leached-out salts. Elsewhere in the West he encounters marshes whose water has been usurped for irrigation and other human uses, and refuge leaflets

that boast of the numbers of miles of canals and dikes, and of water control structures and buildings.

In his final chapter, Burt visits the Prairie Pothole Region of the northern Plains. He had already given up his dream of finding a marsh as described by Roger Tory Peterson: "with its full tantalizing cast of characters: noisy rails and gallinules, coots, and pied-billed grebes; bitterns and long-billed marsh wrens in the reeds, and short-billed marsh wrens in the grassy edges; red-winged blackbirds calling and displaying; swamp sparrows trilling, swallows skimming, ducks dabbling, and herons stalking." In the prairie sloughs and lakes of North Dakota and Saskatchewan, however, Burt does find his real-life Eden marshes. He tells of his travels to the marshes and evokes the memory of earlier naturalists, such as Arthur Cleveland Bent, who marveled at the prairie marshes a century earlier.

Burt has many concerns. He worries about the degradation of marshes by invasive species, notably *Phragmites australis* and purple loosestrife ("the pretty femme fatale of inland fresh marshes"). The obliteration of wetlands by shopping malls and factories, as well as by drainage for agricultural purposes, bothers him. He is troubled by mismanagement of marshes, by ditching, diking, and damming. He worries about the gentrification of marshes, such that boardwalks and informational signs allow a casual visitor a casual glance at a marsh, but at a cost of not experiencing a marsh. He wonders where children can go to find wildness, as he did as a boy.

In the end, though, Burt says we should enjoy what does remain, rather than mourn what has been lost. His book will revive fond memories in the minds of readers who have savored the natural beauty of marshes. For those who have not, it will offer a vicarious taste of what they are missing. The marvelous photos in this book make it a natural for the coffee table, but the text is worthwhile, too, so read the book before putting it on display—*Douglas H. Johnson, USGS Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center, Saint Paul, MN 55108.*