

Backtracking



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出版者: Chelsea Green Publishing

出版时间: 2007-03-07

装帧: Paperback

isbn: 9781933392547

When I come upon an animal's tracks in the woods, I find myself moving back against the animal's direction to trace where it started from, Ted Levin writes in "Backtracking: The Way of a Naturalist." He also traces his own development as a naturalist from his boyhood roots on suburban Long Island to his present life in northern New England. Along the way he introduces us to all sorts of wild creatures from red-backed salamanders, cicadas, and rattlesnakes to manatees, coyotes, and bald eagles. Although he lives in northern New England, Ted sometimes travels far in his search for a variety of wildlife. The lure of Florida's Everglades calls him every winter with its legions of tropical birds and animals. One fall he travels north to Canada's Machais Seal Island to observe puffins and razorbill auks and is attacked by Arctic terns. Later he gets stranded on Bonaventure Island where he ends up sleeping on top of a colony of Leach's storm petrels to be awakened by the birds' nocturnal cooings. Ted Levin's involvement is different than most outdoor naturalists. He lives with wild creatures at one time or another, a fisher, a short-tailed weasel, barred owls, milk snakes, and brown bats as well as observes them in the wild. Often, the wild turns out to be an interstate highway, a crowded beach, or a parking lot. He shows us how accessible the natural world is, that we need look no further than our own backyards to find it.

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