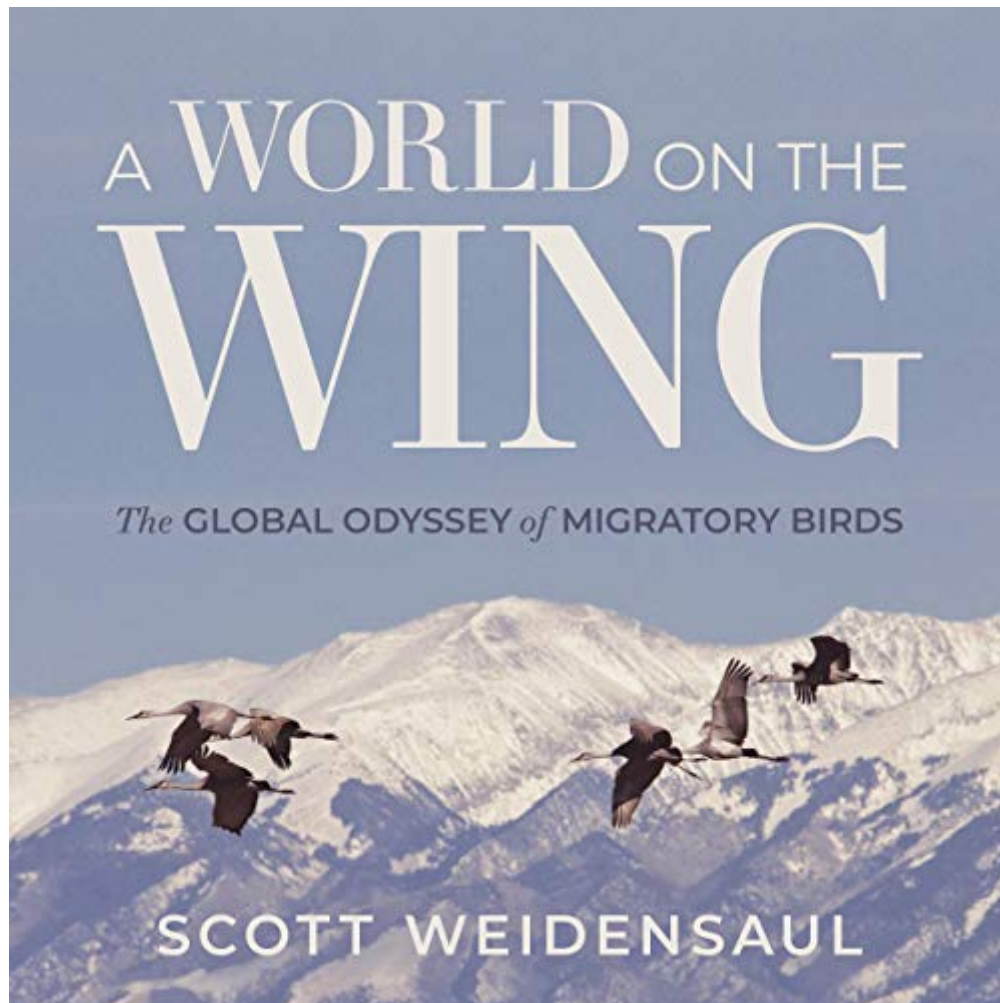


Book Review: A World on the Wing – The Global Odyssey of Migratory Birds by Scott Weidensaul

JoAnn Hackos. August 30, 2021 :

Migrating birds are in trouble – that is the clear and ever-present focus of Scott Weidensaul’s newest study of migration. But despite the dire and discouraging story that Weidensaul presents, there is some opportunity for hope. We are learning more than we have ever known about the incredible migratory journeys of the birds that we see in the northern hemisphere during the summer when they are busy raising families. By understanding these journeys, we have the knowledge and potentially the means to protect so many species that are in trouble today. We must know where the protections will do the best.



Much of the newest data about migration comes from newly miniaturized technology. Geolocators are tiny and reasonably inexpensive tracking devices that are light enough to attach to many of the smallest birds.

This new technology is light years ahead of older, heavy, and expensive satellite transmitters used in the past.

World on the Wing opens with a great story. Scott and colleagues are banding Wilson's, Blackpoll, and other warblers and in Denali National Park when they have an entirely too close an encounter with a mama Grizzly and cub. They managed to avoid a direct attack and continued catching and banding.

Weidensaul's chapter on Spoon-billed Sandpipers on the Pacific coast of China introduces us to the importance of preserving "stopover sites" where birds rest and restore during migration. Mudflats along the Yellow Sea coast once covered 2.7 million acres, providing critical stopover sites for the sandpipers. Two-thirds of those wetlands have been destroyed. As a result, in 1977 scientists concluded that there were only about 400 spoonbills left in the world. In fact, many shorebirds are endangered.

We learn about the Motus Wildlife Tracking System, a system that tracks migratory birds. The Motus system was initially developed in the eastern states, but one is now being developed in Colorado and throughout the central great plains by The Bird Conservancy of the Rockies to track central flyway migrations. Weidensaul interviews our own president, Brad Andres, learning about the problem of Caribbean hunts for Whimbrels, likely to force them into serious decline. The key is to have full knowledge of the migratory bird's full annual cycle so that problems along its path are known and possibly managed.

One story that I find discouraging is the plight of the Kirtland's Warbler. I've been trying for the past three years to get a trip to central Michigan to see this warbler (but for the pandemic). Scientists have been successful in helping to manage the Kirtland's nesting habitat in Michigan so that the warbler is no longer on the endangered species list. We now know, however, that their winter home is on a few tiny islands in the Bahamas, islands that are only two feet above sea level. Given sea level rise and increasingly severe hurricanes, what will happen to the Kirtland's Warbler if the tiny islands disappear?

Weidensaul includes a vast variety of species in his accounts of the perils of migration. He heads out into the Atlantic to learn about seabird migration. He goes to Cyprus to better understand the difficulties of keeping people from trapping millions of songbirds for dinner. There is some small progress but not enough.

We do learn of one positive improvement in the rural Indian state of Assam, in the foothills of the Himalayas. Local people discovered an incredible roost of Amur Falcons during their migration south to southern Africa. Everyone caught and ate them – delicious they said. But the efforts of conservationists worked, helping people to understand how important the birds were and providing the possibility of future income from visiting birders if the birds were no longer hunted. The effort worked, at least for now, although they are still waiting for the visiting birders to come.

Clearly, *A World on the Wing* is challenging to read. Many of the stories are both amazing as they chart the process of migration and discouraging as they report all the dangers. I strongly recommend reading this book – we need to be educated about the problems before we can help to find solutions.