

# SHORT SUBJECTS

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## A Spring Day's Walk on the Wild Side

**T**HE OFFICIAL START OF SPRING is March 21, seven minutes past midnight, Greenwich Mean Time. The outdoors-minded among us dust off our fishing rods and read Aldo Leopold as we wait for the last ice to melt. It was Leopold who said of the season's bird migrations, "The whole continent receives a net profit of a wild poem dropped from the murky skies upon the muds of March." Then Mr. Leopold would shoulder his 12-gauge and try to shoot as much of that poem as he could.

So, as we welcome home the orioles and buntings, fish for sex-crazed salmon, and watch the bears pick the hibernation goobers out of their eyes, remember the animals that shake off conformity and march to a different wing-beat.

**BEAT THE HEAT:** Anyone can hibernate in the winter. But it takes real talent to hibernate in the summer. In a behavior known as estivation, counterculture animals like the tenrec—a hedgehog look-alike from Madagascar—and the California red-legged frog settle down every year for a long summer's nap. Philip T. Northen, a biologist at Sonoma State University, studies the red-legged frog.

"It saves energy," he says of the animal that may have inspired the Mark Twain short story "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." "The frogs have the capacity to slow down for the summer months, waiting for moisture."

They store energy in little fat sacs that they burn while hiding in damp burrows, he says. Other animals, like some crocodiles, turtles, and the African lungfish, go so far as to bury themselves in mud during dry summers.

**THE RIVER LESS TRAVELED:** American eels aren't lazy, they're just smart. While the salmon are pulling up their scaly britches for their final swim upriver, the eels are coasting in the opposite direction. According to Joe E.

Hightower, a zoologist at North Carolina State University, eels are catadromous, meaning



they go downriver to breed, leaving it to their young to fight the current back upstream.

He says the eels presumably swim into the deep ocean waters to lay eggs, although no one has ever seen them do it. The behavior goes against the common notion that streams make better nurseries than the ocean.

"It's such an unusual life-history strategy," says Mr. Hightower, "I don't know if I could defend it." If eels could talk, he adds, they would probably say, "It works for us."

### YOU CAN'T GET THERE FROM HERE:

Schoolchildren in the Northern Hemisphere are taught that birds fly south in the fall. Indeed, there are no birds that fly toward the poles for the winter... on purpose. In the Southern Hemisphere, birds fly north for the winter, which is our summer. But according to Jeremiah R. Trimble, a curator in Harvard University's ornithology department, the whole process just seems too confusing for the fork-tailed flycatcher.

The robin-size bird, whose

normal range is from Mexico to Argentina, drifts as far off course as northern Canada before essentially pulling over, checking the map, and turning around again. Mr. Trimble says the birds can show up for just a few days in the spring (when, flying north, they overshoot Central America) or in the fall (when they just plumb go the wrong way).

"Eastern kingbirds, which are very similar to fork-tailed flycatchers, form these really big flocks," he says. "So it's not unlikely that you get a few fork-tailed flycatchers joining those kinds of flocks, and then when they start moving northward, they'll just come along with."

He says most of the misguided birds are juveniles with just one migration under their belts. He also says there is evidence that North American birds get lost down south, but that there are fewer people watching the spring migration to report it.

—ERIK VANCE

## Other Animal Oddballs

- **Anglerfish**—deep-sea family of fish whose males are often parasites to the female, fusing to her body, and shriveling up until all that's left are the testes
- **Common poorwill**—the only hibernating bird
- **Duck-billed platypus**—the only poisonous mammal
- **Fat-tailed dwarf lemur**—the only hibernating primate
- **Hooded pitohui**—the only poisonous bird
- **Salt-marsh harvest mouse**—land mammal that drinks saltwater
- **Spotted hyenas**—females dominate the pack and have long, tube-shaped genitalia that denote their status in the hierarchy
- **Whippoorwill**—bird that sings to greet the evening

