

## *Introduction*

*Ideas about our relationship with nature...[are] confused by wish, want-to-be, and imaginary worlds that have never existed.*

—from *Strange Encounters*, by Daniel B. Botkin

*Given enough ingenuity, a scientist can make practically any scheme sound plausible.*

—from *The Life of an Oak, An Intimate Portrait*, by Glenn Keator

In 1993, I began occasionally writing what became popular articles on nature-related topics. Although birds were the focus for many of the articles, most also touched on various aspects of the science of ecology; topics included evolution, plant succession, habitat partitioning, food webs, the role of fire and disturbance in oak-dominated habitats, and river ecology. This book contains fourteen of those previously published articles, which have been updated and revised only slightly from their original texts.

Because I have long had an interest in rivers and wild places, the Illinois River, which flows through a mostly rural part of Illinois, is a common backdrop for many of the articles; and the idea of wilderness, or some aspect of a quality called “wildness,” is touched upon more than a few times, especially in the context of finding such a quality in a highly domesticated state such as Illinois. So while each article was written independently of the others, there is a common thread running through all of them.

When I first thought of collecting these articles together into a book, I

still felt that something more was necessary to tie everything together and perhaps better allow the reader to approach the book as a whole. Toward this end, I began writing a series of short memoir pieces, twelve in all, that examine the roots of my fascination with rivers and wild areas. They illustrate how my perspectives on nature and human society have changed over the years, from the typical naivety of youth to what I hope is a mature, common sense outlook, with a minimum of illusions, based on hard-won knowledge and objectivity. Perhaps others with a similar interest in nature, who may be frustrated by their circumstances of living in areas where publicly accessible natural lands may be few and far between or diminishing, may benefit by reading about how one man was able to bring together seemingly disparate, incompatible aspects of his life to find a balance—for want of a better word—with nature as the center, even where influences of modernity were never far away.

The chapters in this book are arranged into two major sections. The experiences written about in *Part One—River Life* occurred in Illinois, mostly along or near the Illinois River and its tributaries. *Part Two—Travel* documents journeys I have taken searching for wild areas and birds in Illinois as well as in the western states, the upper Midwest, and the Great Lakes region. Scattered throughout the book are fourteen line drawings by artist Patti Malmborg Reilly of Maine.