



Rat Island: Predators in Paradise and the World's Greatest Wildlife Rescue

William Stolzenburg

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Rat Island rises from the icy gray waters of the Bering Sea, a mass of volcanic rock covered with tundra, midway between Alaska and Siberia. Once a remote sanctuary for enormous flocks of seabirds, the island gained a new name when shipwrecked rats colonized, savaging the nesting birds by the thousands. Now, on this and hundreds of other remote islands around the world, a massive-and massively controversial-wildlife rescue mission is under way.

Islands, making up just 3 percent of Earth's landmass, harbor more than half of its endangered species. These fragile ecosystems, home to unique species that evolved in peaceful isolation, have been catastrophically disrupted by mainland predators-rats, cats, goats, and pigs ferried by humans to islands around the globe. To save these endangered islanders, academic ecologists have teamed up with professional hunters and semiretired poachers in a radical act of conservation now bent on annihilating the invaders. Sharpshooters are sniping at goat herds from helicopters. Biological SWAT teams are blanketing mountainous isles with rat poison. *Rat Island* reveals a little-known and much-debated side of today's conservation movement, founded on a cruel-to-be-kind philosophy.

Touring exotic locales with a ragtag group of environmental fighters, William Stolzenburg delivers both perilous adventure and intimate portraits of human, beast, hero, and villain. And amid manifold threats to life on Earth, he reveals a new reason to hope.

Rat Island: Predators in Paradise and the World's Greatest Wildlife Rescue Details

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From Reader Review *Rat Island: Predators in Paradise* and the World's Greatest Wildlife Rescue for online ebook

Paul Heikkila says

Conservationists work to restore bird populations to islands (off New Zealand, in the Bering Sea, off the coasts of California and Mexico) by the extermination of introduced predators (rats, feral cats, goats, pigs, rabbits, weasels....). Can Manhattan be next? Bibliography. Wonderful science writing. Maybe not for the squeamish. Don't let Kitty see you reading this.

Lisa says

The eradication of predators in order to save the native species. I was hoping for a National Geo program instead of a book. After reading it, I realized that will never happen due to the sensitive topic of "killing animals", like 160,000 goats in Galapagos to save the giant tortoise. So this book is as good as it can get to know the history and how the environmentalist did it. A very good read.

Catherine says

Dull start but by the end, it'd gotten much more interesting. I'd actually give it a 3.5 if I could. Endings of each chapter are cliché cliffhangers (not very well written) but scientifically it's got its good points. Would recommend only for a very specific type of audience.

Marcella Wigg says

People often think that careers in conservation are synonymous with warm, fuzzy contact with animals, but as *Rat Island* demonstrates, saving one species often means killing off another, especially when one is talking about island ecosystems besieged by non-native invaders. Islands cover only a small portion of Earth's surface (5%) but an outsized proportion of its biodiversity (25%), which evolved in response to the frequent lack of standard predators present on the mainlands of the continents. New Zealand, for instance, was the land of birds, and cats, rats, and the stoats and ferrets misguidedly unleashed to kill off the rats have devastated native species there, which evolutionarily were left unguarded from such predators.

Stolzenberg focuses mostly on the rat, that most hated animal, and perhaps the worst threat to island conservation efforts worldwide: rats are hardy, wily, highly adaptable, and extremely rapidly-reproducing; their size allows them to invade spaces larger predators cannot reach. They also have an ugly habit of going on binges after winter periods of starvation, killing entire colonies of seabird chicks and seabirds alike in rapid succession, and then leaving the vast majority of the animal behind uneaten. Many islands' ecosystems have been devastated by their presence.

In response, a certain school of biologists have taken to enacting campaigns of total annihilation on the rats, poisoning them with anticoagulants so that the previous health of the ecosystem can be restored. "Killing to

live," the idea is called at some point, and this book looks closely at their methods and results (largely successful, with some public mishaps--including the title island!).

This book is very interesting and well-researched, providing a background on the threat invaders pose to island ecology and also short biographical portraits of the various players in New Zealand's and Aleutian Islands' attempts to save indigenous animals through rat extermination. Various interesting mishaps of human interaction with animal are discussed, including the Steller's sea cow. The content itself is fascinating, but could have been dry if framed without an attempt at a narrative. However, Stolzenberg masterfully intertwines the various stories in far-flung locales that are explored to get a thorough picture of the successes and challenging of such an approach to conservation.

Elizabeth says

As heard on the NPR Books podcast.

Marty says

We've all heard about the direct impact that man has had on numerous ecologies, how humans have helped spur the latest great extinction event*. But what is rather less well-known is the impact we've had through the introduction (accidental or deliberate but poorly considered) of invasive species - cats, weasels, arctic foxes and most especially RATS.

Scientists estimate that at least 103 species of animals - mostly birds - have gone extinct due primarily to predation by introduced rats for which they have no natural defense in Hawaii alone. Multiply that by the number of other vulnerable islands and that figure goes up significantly. Numerous others have been driven to near extinction by rat infestations. It's even thought the true story behind the devastation on Easter Island was precipitated by the presence of imported rats.

We know the damage that's been done - and that continues today. But what can and is being done? In short, small groups are mounting herculean efforts to remove invaders completely from these islands and give the native species a chance to claw their way from the brink of extinction, using methods as absolute as they are controversial.

Rat Island tells the tale of small groups of naturalists, park rangers and evangelists who are fighting the uphill battle against invasive species - and winning.

THE STORY

Rat Island is the story of what we've lost when introduced species enter an ecosystem ripe for plunder. Numbers of the natives drop precipitously, even to the point of extinction. William Stolzenburg details in grisly detail some of the magnificent species - primarily birds - who have wiped out by a few pairs of rats who landed on an otherwise isolated island of unique life. He goes in depth most on the story of New Zealand and its embattled flightless parrot, the kakapo, but touches similar examples of woe all over the world.

Then he tells the tale of those who would save these island oases where so many unique species dwell. Using

diverse methods such as wiping out entire populations of invasive species via poison, trapping and mata hari goats, naturalists do what they can to rid these fragile habitats of the marauders so that the rare, native species can attempt to make a comeback. Meanwhile, others desperately search for new isolated locations to move the remaining populations of threatened species where eradication isn't possible in a last ditch effort to protect them and give them a chance.

Stolzenburg does a good job at setting the stage in this book - perhaps too good. The first half of the story covers the relentless slaughter of millions of birds, insects and reptiles by introduced species. From the eradication of seabird colonies throughout the Pacific islands by 3 species of ship-borne rats to the devastation wrought upon the unique fauna of New Zealand's islands by a succession of imported creatures (rats > rabbits > stoats) to the voracious appetites of the arctic fox among previously protected auklet colonies in the Aleutians, Stolzenburg's text is a litany of horrors. After the first three chapters you are horrified; after the next 3, despondent; then comes hopelessness after even the most courageous early efforts at restoring balance are blocked by beauracracy.

It was only the hope of a light at the end of the long, dark tunnel that kept me reading. But even the second half of the book - the 'lighter' half - was darkened by the constant veil of human stupidity and continued horror stories. Perhaps it IS the reality, but having even the greatest successes constantly edged in darkness made it hard to celebrate the few, but increasing, victories being had in the conservation fight.

While I liked the book overall, I would have preferred a slightly more positive tone in later chapters to highlight the hope we have at restoring some of the balance.

About the Book

One interesting aspect of the book is the rough-hewn edges of the pages, which give it a more natural feel than most books produced today. That said, however, the book is shorter than expected, too as the last 42 pages are all bibliography thus clocking the actual text at 222 pages. I'm not sure why but it felt like I was cheated a little bit.

CONCLUSION

Some chapters of our natural history are already written (unless we figure out how to clone extinct species) and its important to understand what's already been done to fully detail the importance (and magnitude) of what needs to be done.

Rat Island offers a look into the worst of the situation but some beacons of hope in preserving already threatened animals from 'unnatural' threats. While dark at times, the book is a worthwhile story to know.

* it has been estimated that the current rate of extinction is 10,000x the natural rate, mostly due to human activities and their environmental impact.

Bruce Rideout says

The author does a masterful job of turning what could be a dry and depressing conservation issue into a riveting and hopeful story. Very interesting and informative; not dry science and not fluff story-telling.

Reid says

I was suprised by how much I enjoyed this book. A century-long account of island restoration and predator exterminantion didn't sound like the most riviteing topic, but Stolzenburg turns it into a totally engrossing story. It's full of unlikely and sympathetic heroes, like Richard Henry of New Zelanad and master cat-trapper Bill Wood. The story also has as cunning antagonists (invasive rats and feral cats, mostly) that Stolzenburg really builds up into nigh-unstoppable foes. I found it impossible not to get pulled in and get personally committed to the story. You feel a sense of dread when he hints that an island redoubt of New Zealand flightless birds may have been invaded by stoats.

Dianne says

Probably one of the best written scientific books ever. Reads like a novel, but is good solid science.

RUSTY LINGENFELTER says

Informative and balanced. I'm not sure what prompted me to read this book, but expect it was mentioned in something else I read. I learned a number of things about invasive species and eradication that I didn't know and got more detail on the few eradication efforts I was aware of. After reading, I am now aware that the problem is more widespread than I was aware. The author did a great job of taking a subject that could have been a dry documentary or unbalanced propoganda and making it balanced and interesting. This is a subject that more people should be aware of this is probably a good place to start.

Dan says

Very interesting story of human destruction and reconstruction and the philosophical viewpoint behind out mistakes and our choices.

Matt says

Organizationally, I admit I wished for a bit better developmental editing; it felt as if this jumped around a bit in ways that sometimes unintentionally obfuscated various storylines or narrative points. That said, Stolzenburg's book is incredibly well-researched and makes an important case for certain types of conservation science and I'm quite glad I read it. I'll be thinking about parts of this one for some time.

[4 stars for conservation science and some great narratives.]

Jackson Matthews says

I guess it is a necessary evil to get things back in balance. I like how the author is not gleeful about killing.

Minna says

I cannot recommend this book highly enough. I half-expected a book of ecological nonfiction to be frustratingly dry, but this was absolutely gripping. Rat Island, while being an actual island as well, is more of a symbolic title representing the transformation of far-flung islands full of native flora and fauna into barren rocks with dying native populations and swarms of rats (among other alien invaders). The efforts by dedicated individuals to rid the islands of their unwelcome colonists and return the struggling populations to health were fascinating... and saddening. I realize that this book was published in 2011, but a quick internet search of the kakapo in 2018 shows that they are still struggling to survive. Ostensibly the least auklets and other birds of the Aleutian islands are doing better; I found several 2016 articles saying that the seabird populations of the "Rat Islands" in the Aleutian chain are recovering nicely. However, Kiska (one of the largest islands) still hasn't had its invaders removed and, according to recent articles, there are no immediate plans to do so.

The kakapo of New Zealand:

The least auklet of the Aleutian islands:

I was also very intrigued by the author's inclusion of information about rats and new research that points to rats having feelings such as joy and empathy (among others). It's easy to villainize the unappealing, ill-reputed rat but it was news to me that they had so many positive (even somewhat endearing?) characteristics.

Overall, an excellent book and worth a read to anyone with an interest in ecology, biology, or environmental issues, or really anyone looking for an interesting non-fiction title.

Added to 2018 PopSugar Reading Challenge in category: Book with an animal in the title.

Valerie says

I had a lot of trouble getting through certain sections of this book. I admit, I am sensitive. In this book, there were a lot of animals getting killed, getting poisoned, tortured, and eaten alive.

It is what you would expect about a book about endangered and extinct animals, but it was still hard to read at times. I was thinking about not finishing the book when a friend of mine suggested that I shouldn't read the book if I wasn't getting anything out of it. I concluded that I should finish the book because I was getting a lot out of it. The book had a lot of information I didn't know about, and ideas that I hadn't thought about.

I didn't know that it was possible to get rid of all the rats, goats, cats, etc. on an island, let alone that there were certain situations that this was being done to save endangered species (usually birds). It is a

complicated subject, and I'm not sure how I feel about it, but I am really glad I finished reading this.

My favorite parts of the book were about specific conservationists trying to save certain birds. I especially liked the parts about Richard Henry, a conservationist in the late 1800s early 1900s in New Zealand, who tried saving the kakapo, a type of parrot. Later, another conservationist who was trying to save the kakapo named one of the birds Richard Henry. I loved all the information about that specific bird. I raced to Wikipedia after I was done the book to see if Richard Henry the kakapo was still alive, but he had actually died in 2010.

Another part of the book that I really enjoyed was a short section about rats. There is some scientific research done on rats that concluded that they are capable of empathy and laughter/joy. I loved that the author included this information that made the rats more sympathetic. I didn't expect to find this chapter in a book about killing rats. The author was very fair to include this. I am going to try to find a general book on rats to find out more about this.
