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Book Review: Locust – Evergreen Audubon

4-5 minutes

The Devastating Rise and Mysterious Disappearance of the Insect that Shaped the American Frontier

Jeffrey Lockwood writes crime stories, and *Locust* is one of them. The crime occurred in the 1870s when hordes of hungry locusts descended on the plains of North America and ate everything in their path, all the crops, the boards on the homes, the handles of farm implements, and even people's clothing. The Rocky Mountain Locusts (*Melanoplus spretus*), of course, had been invading the plains for millennia but not until European settlers farmed the plains with single crops did they evoke such dread.



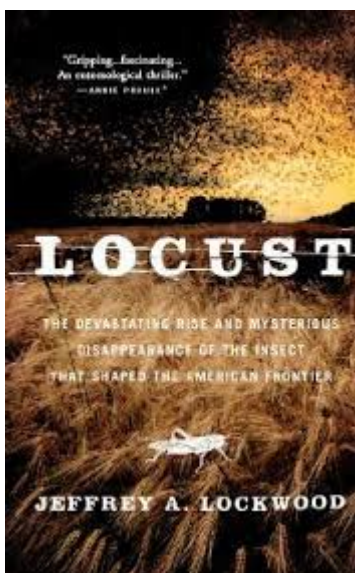
A 1902 sketch from the University of Minnesota labels grasshoppers as among “insects notably injurious” at the time.

In the first third of *Locust*, Lockwood sets the scene by describing

the locust hordes and the devastation they caused and providing an historical context. People compared them to tornadoes; they wasted the landscape in much the same way. Dr. Albert Child, an early meteorologist, calculated the size of the swarm moving through Nebraska in 1874.

“They were visible from six to seven hours of each of the successive five days ... the army in the line of advance would be 120 hours by 15 miles per hour = 1,800 miles in length, and say at even 110 miles in width, an area of 198,000 square miles! And then from one-quarter to one-half mile deep.”

That swarm was the size of the combined areas of Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont.



Lockwood recounts the response of the people and the politicians to the devastation. The first reaction was to blame the people for their plight. The locusts were, as the Bible affirmed, a punishment from God. The farmers must have done something wrong. Because of this mindset, the government was loath to

help, even to provide food for farm families who were starving because they had lost all their crops and all their income. The politicians argued that helping the stricken would encourage dependence on government aid. John Pillsbury, governor of Illinois and a member of the Pillsbury family, argued that handouts to the poor would “undermine their moral fiber.” Finally, one lone army general insisted that the army intervene with food from its stores.

You might have read the description of the swarm’s behavior in Laura Ingalls Wilder’s, *Little House on the Prairie*. The family’s wheat crop was nearly ready to harvest when a cloud appeared in midday. The falling insects sounded like a hailstorm. Once they descended on the wheat, the sounds of their chewing were like thousands of scissors, devouring every living plant. Wilder concludes, “not a green thing was in sight anywhere.”

The second third of Lockwood’s account is devoted to the scientists who were moved to study the locusts and understand how they might be managed. As a result of the work of Charles Valentine Riley, Norman Criddle, and Boris Petrovich Uvarov, scientists began to understand the locusts’ life cycle. They were puzzled, however, by the fact that by 1900 the insects had vanished and were declared extinct by the 1940s. Other locust species still exist throughout the world. Only the Rocky Mountain Locust had disappeared. The last living specimen was recorded in 1902. What happened?

The last third of *Locust* unravels the mystery. But—you’re just going to have to read the book yourself to find out what happened. It was Lockwood and his graduate students who

investigated the mystery and found the answer. Lockwood was then a professor of entomology at the University of Wyoming. You'll be amazed at what they discovered.

When we first chose *Locust* as one of the books for the newly formed Evergreen Nature Book Club, I was not too enthusiastic. But once my copy arrived, I could not put it down. Lockwood is a superb writer. He weaves what might have been a difficult subject into a fascinating story. He is presently in the philosophy department at the University of Wyoming where he teaches creative writing. He has written nine books about insects and was awarded both the Pushcart Prize and the prestigious John Burroughs Medal in the field of natural history.

Jeffrey A. Lockwood

Basic Books, 2004