Susan Cerulean's new book is 'more than a nature memoir'

By Ron Hartung
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Among the sun-baked naturalists in Florida's Big Bend and beyond, the birth of a new book by Tallahassee's Susan Cerulean is cause for celebration. They've been gobbling up her written works for more than 30 years. If you search on Goodreads, you'll find her name listed 22 times as writer, co-writer, editor or contributor. Her titles tell you where her heart lies. "The Wild Heart of Florida." "A Journey After Swallow-tailed Kites." "What Have You Done for Wildlife Lately?"

In her newest book, "The Call to a Wilder Wisdom," Cerulean's heart is on display as never before. And she's writing not just for her card-carrying compatriots. She's writing for all of us, including the weekend naturalists, the ones who admit we too often think of Mother Earth as only a distant relative.

We're the same ones who might be tempted to think, "Oh, another nature book." Well, no. Each book builds on its predecessors. And this book charts a significant shift in Cerulean's outlook. She writes in her introduction: "For three decades, St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge has been the center of my conservation work, my prayers, and my awe. When I cross the tidal waters of Indian Pass, I move between the developed mainland and the island refuge, where the land and wild creatures speak an urgent message…. This book is more than a nature memoir; it chronicles a necessary shift in my consciousness. Through my experiences on the island, I now believe that a better, older wisdom is available to us. I came to realize that the myth of human exceptionalism … is embedded in Western culture."

The author was trained as a wildlife biologist. "The Call to a Wilder Wisdom" traces her path through various government jobs that were instructive but ultimately not what she was seeking. In this book she also explains how years ago she adopted the name "Susan Cerulean" – and why it was, and is, such a good fit.

Her mentor Deena Metzger writes in the book's foreword: "The theme of passionate care for wild creatures continues in her remarkable new book, [in which Cerulean] shows us … the crucial importance of living in right relationship with all of creation…. [S]he urges that our companions on this broken planet are wise and sacred beings. They have much to teach us, if only we are willing to listen and learn from them."

Metzger also describes Cerulean as "a musician of language." No doubt you'll find your favorite passages. This is one of mine: "The high sun beats on my cheeks, ears, and shoulders, and the Gulf trembles at the lip of the land. Cicada songs rise in the pines. Sand sticks to the sweat on my skin, adhering, just as it does to the filamentous roots of the beach grasses that brush the air near my face. The roots and vines of morning glory were deeply buried before they were laid bare by Hurricane Fred's assault. They dangle

from the scarp like downed powerlines, surprised at the drying touch of the wind. Withina few days' time, new clusters of leaves will sprout from nodes that never expected to see the sun. They stanch the horizontal flow of sand."

And this: "Just as the mockingbird shrinks her feathers in the presence of predators, when I went to work in the state wildlife agency, I learned to defer to the men (there were only men) in the hierarchy above me. They wore cowboy boots and shirts with pearl buttons. When they stood in the hallway talking, one might lean into a door frame and use it to scratch his back, like a bear in the woods rubs against a tree."

In this book, you'll work up a vicarious sweat, witness the wild kingdom firsthand and encounter an adventure or two. "Suddenly a rip current was pulling me straight out to sea," she writes. "In my fear and confusion, I slipped off the surfboard and gripped it, eye level with the surface of the waves. I could no longer see my family and couldn't signal relatives for help. I didn't have enough upper-body strength to pull myself back onto the board. My wet hair tangled into my face, my eyes, my nose. My breathing was rasping and fast. I was afraid for my life."

Cerulean describes her approach to the natural world as "motherful" and explains: "It is akin to the sprawl of the mother alligator over the enormous … nest of her unborn young. Or how the snowy plover opens her wing to shield a just-hatched chick…. We cannot repair all that has been broken [on our planet]. We may not be able to fully cool and stabilize the climate or entirely reverse extinction. What we can do is change our minds and align once again with Earth's benevolent purposes."

Beautifully written, thoughtful, reverent, brave, troubling but ultimately hopeful. Once you've read Susan Cerulean's new book, you won't necessarily be ready to change your name. But you'll understand completely why she changed hers.