

A Rich and Fertile Mystery

Jamaica Plain, January 8, 2006, Carl Martland

Over the last eight years, I have had the remarkable good fortune to be able to spend a lot of time in the woods. In our woods, I suppose I should say, as my wife Nancy and I purchased an old farm in Sugar Hill, New Hampshire back in 1998 and have since added two more parcels for a total of 62 acres of land (this sounds like a lot, but it is assessed at about the same level as our twelfth of an acre in Roslindale!). Nancy was also the prime instigator in galvanizing our neighbors (and me) to create the Ammonoosuc Conservation Trust, which in 2000 acquired another 80 acres nearby. I have always enjoyed the outdoors, these acquisitions gave me the means and opportunity as well as the motivation to explore and enjoy the woods, the swamps, and the fields. I find that I spend a couple of hours a day visiting and re-visiting all of my favorite spots, again and again, whether hot, cold, raining or snowing.

I didn't expect to be spending much time in the woods. Sugar Hill is just west of Franconia Notch, about 6 miles from the site of the Old Man of the Mountains. From our front yard we look out at the Kinsman range, tiny pieces of Lafayette, Garfield, and several other 4000-footers, along with various local hills and valleys. My interest in having a place in Sugar Hill was its proximity to the high peaks, and I envisioned myself hiking extensively, just as I did as a teenager when I spent a couple of weeks each summer at Dolly Copp Campground in Pinkham Notch. In fact, I didn't really know what else I would do up there, except perhaps cut firewood and read books.

Now I look back on these eight years and find that I have gone hiking only 2-3 times per year, while I have gone into the woods 50-60 times per year. This may or may not strike you as odd - but it surely would have seemed strange to my younger self to spend so much time wandering about an area smaller than the Arnold Arboretum when I was right at the edge of the entire White Mountain National Forest - hundreds of square miles of what the English call an "Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty".

But I have found that the local woods are more than enough for me, and I can't get enough of them. Like Thoreau, I like nothing better than to set off on my rounds to see what's going on in the Lower 40, or by the Pond, or in the Upper Meadow, or at Two Stump, or at any of the other notable places I am privileged to visit and to name.

Thoreau says that "we are surrounded by a rich and fertile mystery. May we not probe it, pry into it, employ ourselves about it - a little?" Shouldn't we be on the alert - not always, perhaps, but often - "to find God in nature - to know his lurking places." What a wonderful concept - not where God lives, but where he goes to get away from it all; not to issue commandments or to accept offerings but to enjoy what is here and available to any of us.

So that may explain why I so frequently set off for the Lower 40, usually with a clippers and a folding saw (for trail work), binoculars or a camera, guidebooks of one sort or another, notebook and a pen, lunch, and a drink. I may look like a hiker, but I am definitely not going hiking - I'm not even going on a walk. Instead, I'm simply going into the woods. My friend Tony, in setting out into the woods and fields around his house on the Eastern Shore of Chesapeake Bay, says he is going out seeking an "adventure" - which might be seeing an eagle or finding a fox's den. In Thoreau's terms, both Tony and I are trying to "probe and pry" into the "rich and fertile mystery of life."

There are several levels of activity encompassed in this probing and prior, all of which can be described by the same term: life in the woods. At first, it is natural just to see what you can see, to observe the birds and identify the flowers. Thoreau called this "gazing with interest at swamps". This is what the guidebooks, the binoculars, the camera and the notebook are for.

"Gazing with interest into swamps" is much more than creating a life list or taking pretty pictures. This careful observation is a means of seeing what is really going on, of sensing and perhaps understanding more about life in the woods. Thoreau had a grand project that

was interrupted by his premature death; he was working on his "Kalendar", which would show what flowers were blooming and what animals were doing day-by-day through the year. There is scientific interest in such projects, and Thoreau's observations are relevant to today's discussions of global warming. But there is a spiritual as well as a scientific benefit from seeing and understanding more about the interconnected web of life. Here are a few of the things I have seen:

- I once sat on the hillside in the August sun watching a wren making repeated trips bringing insects to its young in a bird house in our back yard. This was interesting, but what happened the next day was much more so: the wrens fledged at precisely the time - the same day - that grasshoppers suddenly bloom in our yard and in the fields. The very day that the young, inexperienced birds were pushed out of their comfortable house was the first day that their food was abundant and easily captured. A week later, the wrens were gone, leaving the grasshoppers and the crickets to rule supreme over the lawn.

- Another day I watched as two groups of insects apparently fought a pro-longed battle over a square yard of still water at the edge of the reeds. These half-inch long insects, which I call whirligig bugs for lack of further knowledge, were tightly clumped together as they foraged on surface of the pond. Their scouts protected their perimeter by swimming extremely rapidly in circles of 5-6 inches in diameter, sometimes clockwise and sometimes anti-clockwise. A half dozen such dervishes patrolled and protected the entire front for the group, knocking away any scouts from the opposing group or any other insect that dared to approach. The group held its territory for the rest of the summer - and a similar group was there the next year.

- I have often come across wood frogs by the pond, where they are notable because of their beautiful skin, almost a fawn color, offset only by a black mask. Why the mask? Well, one day in the spring I came across an adult wood frog sitting among the rotting leaves and other detritus of the forest floor - the fawn color was exactly the color of the leaves, and the black mask was the color of the soil. The coloration provided perfect

camouflage only in early spring - which is the time when these frogs travel to the pond for the big mating party.

- Last summer, I was surprised to see many pickerel frogs stationed in the grass about 12-18 inches from the edge of the pond - surprised because I had seldom seen even one of these frogs in the previous seven summers. That same day, I noticed, also for the first time, a dragon fly with very clear wings and no evident distinguishing marks, just hanging there in the grass. Upon further examination, I realized that the dragonfly nymphs were just that morning emerging from the pond, walking 12-18 inches inland, then climbing and eventually clinging to stalks of grass or weed; after a while, the dragon flies would break out of their shell and just hang there letting their wings dry. As I approached, they would fly straight up 15 to 20 feet, look around, and then fly off on their maiden voyage. They lacked markings, because they were so new. The two new sightings were of course related. The frogs were there because they like a nice brunch of dragon fly nymph, a delightful meal that is only served once a year. And the frogs were not the only obstacle for the young dragon flies: there were tree swallows acting strangely, zipping back and forth across the pond rather than flying in their usual circles. As I watched through binoculars, I even saw a swallow catch one of the new dragon flies as it made its first - and last - voyage, an insect living its own ill-fated version of the Titanic.

This brings me to the second reflection on "life in the woods", namely the sheer abundance and exuberance of life.

- The wood frogs, protected by their perfect coloration, assemble early in the spring by the hundreds at the pond, and each female produces hundreds of eggs. I have seen swarms of tadpoles - 20-40,000 of them in a dense ribbon 50 yards long and a yard or two wide. Like seeds of a pine tree, few will even survive to adulthood, but most will make it out of the pond, valiantly moving off into the fields and the woods in search of a life.

- Even black flies serve a purpose. These notorious insects that can make us so miserable in May and June also serve as food for many species of birds that are pushing northward at a time when no food is left over from the winter.

- The plants are as remarkable as the animals - goldenrod and Joe Pye Weed grow to cover the fields, seemingly springing up to five or ten feet, seemingly within a few days. In short, the pace and fecundity of life in the woods is truly astounding. And, as Thoreau points out, every seed and every tadpole has the ability, under the right conditions, to reproduce itself. Left unchecked, a few species could fill up the world.

Another perspective on life in the woods concerns my life in the woods. I am not just an observer and a student, but a participant. I cut trails, prune the trees, leave a border around the pond for the dragonflies and the frogs, and help conserve some open space. We all need to do this, protecting and preserving habitats and, where possible, reintroducing habitats.

Finally, there is "LIFE" in the woods in the sense that the essence of life is to be found in the woods. There is an equanimity to be gained by being in the woods. Time loses its constancy - my split second sighting of a tree swallow catching the newly emerged dragon fly will stay with me the rest of my life, yet an afternoon spent in trail work can pass in a flash, a Zen-like experience of being one with nature.

And there are some delectable moments. Robert Frost wrote about the red winterberries and the snow-laden shrubs in the alder patch, with the footprints left by the snowshoe hares scampering through the frozen swamps. He talks of being lifted to "an existence on a plane of snow" that is "one level higher than the earth below, one level nearer heaven overhead." I know exactly what he means, for I have been in such "Winter Edens" on just such brilliant, cold days. In fact, I stopped by one on the day I first began to work on this essay, and I have found the same Winter Edens in the Arnold Arboretum. This plane of existence that is "higher than earth and nearer to heaven" is right next to our homes, even in Boston, if we care to look for it.

This is the kind of illustration that I think Thoreau had in mind when he spoke of writing "his new testament" that would be based upon our own experiences here in New England. This was a common theme of the Transcendentalists; Emerson asked "Why should not we have a poetry of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us and not a history of theirs?"

I can only agree with Emerson, as I agree with Thoreau and Frost. I am not sure of what is meant by a life of the spirit, nor am I sure what to think about god. But I do believe in creation, i.e. in our existence here in this beautiful universe. And I am endlessly fascinated by the "rich and fertile mystery" that is so real to me during my time in the woods, where I often enjoy entire afternoons at a higher plane of existence, and where I hope to catch a glimpse of God, lurking about perhaps in the next alder swamp.