

Introduction

When I was a boy, I was surrounded by nature. I grew up in the town of Amherst, Massachusetts, in a house that was beautifully situated in the landscape. The house lot itself was not particularly large, but the topography surrounding it gave the woods a certain endless quality that still resonates within me to this day. To the immediate east and north of the house ran a curving and ever-deepening ravine formed in the sandy soil by a small, ephemeral stream, and for many years the farm on the other side of the ravine was uninhabited. Even after the property of the farm was eventually purchased, the ravine acted as a barrier that prevented the new neighbors from feeling like they were too close.

This ravine served as a playground for my brother and sister and me. The stream was dammed innumerable times and tiny impoundments that seemed to get a little larger and more ambitious with every passing attempt were established by our own department of public works. We used shovels to move mud and sand around, and sticks found on the ground to add reinforcement to the structure. Beaver dams were our inspiration, and I can remember how, even as a child, I was so very impressed with what beavers could accomplish. I think the one element that the beavers added to their dams that we could not was patience. We could manage to invest an hour or two in each of our dam-building projects, but we never spent every waking moment fixated on the idea of stopping the water. We were children, after all.

The ravine was also a major thoroughfare for travel between our house and that of the Cushings. The road that ran in front of our home was well paved and had a rather high speed limit. My mother didn't like the idea of young kids walking near it if we didn't have to, but the ravine seemed like a perfectly reasonable alternative, so that was how we traveled. We were as at ease in those woods as Robin Hood would have been in Sherwood Forest, and with every passing year we got to know the lay of the land better and better. This was particularly useful to any of us who engaged in a rousing game of "ball tag." The rules of this game, invented by Tom Cushing, were simple. All you needed was a Nerf football and a yard. If you were "it," you had to nail someone with the football. If you weren't "it," you had to run like hell. At some point the game spilled out of the Cushings' yard and into the ravine, and to this day I have vivid memories of running for my life and closing in on unworthy opponents through those trees.

The stream running through the ravine eventually emptied into a pond not too far from my house. I say "not too far" now, but as a kid it seemed like a treacherous journey through Mirkwood Forest itself. We avoided following the stream and always circumvented the wetlands by way of the drier uplands. The pond was a feature of an old farm that had also been abandoned. Much more interesting was the abandoned sandpit that also resided on this property. It seemed huge, and the walls of the pit (about 20 feet in height) seemed like the walls of the Grand Canyon. The mining of sand must have been only recently halted because the walls were so vertical. This made for ideal nesting sites for a colony of bank swallows that called the sandpit home, and for many years their nest holes perforated the sandbanks. After a time, however, even the swallows abandoned the sandpit, but I have never really understood why. We never hurt or molested the birds in any way, but perhaps erosion took its toll, for one year the entire area was simply deemed unacceptable and the swallows were gone, never to return.

Across the street from my house there was an undeveloped lot that provided access to the Holyoke Range State Park. I lived right across the street from Mt. Norwottuck, and the trails and

roads through the Park were heavily traveled by my friends and me. We would visit an old Boy Scout campsite on the side of the mountain, or climb to the top of the exotically named Rattlesnake Knob. We spent hours in and around the Horse Caves, and of course there was the summit of Norwottuck itself. The first bit of exposed rock offered an amazing view to the north. My house was plainly visible, as was the entire town of Amherst. You could see landscape features in the towns of Pelham, Montague, Leverett, Sunderland, and Hadley in the foreground, and the Green Mountains of Vermont on the northern horizon. A walk of an additional 100 yards to the actual geological summit of the mountain brought you to an old fire tower that was removed many years ago. When it was still in place, we could climb to the top and get a 360° view of the Pioneer Valley itself. The skyscrapers of Springfield and Hartford were visible to the south, and what appeared to be endless forests stretched off to the east and west.

As luck would have it, my family also made an annual trip into the forests of the Adirondacks. There was a Girl Scout camp called Camp Little Notch that was nestled into some 2,800 acres of rugged mountain forests, and for one magical week every year my family was able to occupy this camp with no one else around. We plied the waters of the camp's crystal clear lake for hours at a time in pursuit of largemouth bass, perch, and sunfish. At night, with flashlights in hand, we would walk to Flat Rock and search the shoreline for rock bass. The various campsites were referred to as units and were gifted with magical names like Sleepy Hollow, Timagimi, Pine Point, Sherwood Forest, and Tall Timbers. Each unit had its own feeling, and each left an indelible mark in my memories. The most vivid of those are from my teenage years when I was able to work at the camp for two entire summers. I learned the most about the property in that time and learned to cherish the solitude of our family week even more than I would have thought possible.

The woods and mountains surrounding my childhood home, and the forest, lake, and mountains of Camp Little Notch served as the cradle that nurtured my personal connection with Nature. As a kid I was aware of Nature's importance and

variety, but what I lacked was a meaningful body of knowledge about how Nature worked. I can remember sitting in my grandmother's house and looking through her copy of *Peterson's Field Guide to the Birds*. As I flipped through the pages, I gazed (with awe) at the birds that surely existed out there somewhere, but that I had never seen. I was filled with a desire to learn as much as I could, so when I was ready to go to college, I enrolled in the wildlife biology program at U-Mass, Amherst. There I started the lifelong process of observation and study that have so wonderfully enriched my life. I will never forget the day I saw my first black-and-white warbler and realized that all of those mysterious birds from my grandmother's field guide were actually real. All I needed was some knowledge and understanding.

That's where this book comes in. My personal connection to Nature was started with exposure, but refined with knowledge. Personally, I am very interested in seeing wild places protected, and to my mind that requires knowledge. You cannot care for something that you don't know about. So every week for the past thirteen years I have tried my best to encourage a love of Nature in the readers of my various newspaper columns. I try to engage my readers with stories of events occurring right outside their windows, and I always encourage people to get out and see things for themselves. I even have a special column for children that is designed to encourage imagination and artistic expression in my younger readers. The essays contained herein represent a snapshot of the hundreds of columns that I have written over the years, and I hope that you can feel the love for Nature that I try to convey. If I can help you learn something you didn't know before, or care about something you never really considered before, then I have accomplished what I set out to do.