

Home. F + S

About 1835 words

Datus Proper
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Belgrade, MT 59714
(406) 388-3345

A PLACE OF OUR OWN

Wildlife uses all of our farm, fanning out from a marshy core that has survived without much change, over the years since Lewis and Clark passed through, simply because it is too wet to plow and too brushy for cattle. You can sit in the shade of a cottonwood and watch whatever show is playing. Yesterday the actors were baby teal skittering after midges, sandhill cranes dancing, and sora rails practicing their ventriloquist act.

Immersion in nature is the best part of this place. It's not paradise, mind you -- not when you learn the problems -- and sixty acres are hardly enough to give me or my dogs a run. None of us are complaining, though. We've all done time on pavement, and this is better.

Getting particular

When you add water to a piece of Montana, you bring to the surface a curious, post-glacial fertility. We dug a deep pond,

and it works. Painted turtles crawl up on the banks for what must be their mating season (though it's hard to be sure, with a turtle) and diving ducks drop in on their way to Canada. Just once a loon called while we were having breakfast and got me so stirred up that I spilled tea on my jeans.

The problem with still water, in this climate, is that ice keeps birds and mammals away for three or four months. Trout in the pond may run short of oxygen, too. Meanwhile the spring creek remains open, a winding corridor with riffles and pools and deep dark holes where a monster could hide.

Here in the family, we began calling it Humility Creek -- not so much a philosophical statement as a reflection on the eyes of fly-fishers slinking homeward. The brown trout at least had the courtesy to feed discreetly, but the rainbows got you talking to yourself. They would lie in mid-stream, taking every mayfly that came by, except for the one with a hook in it.

Research was in order. We began marking each trout we could land by clipping its adipose fin, then releasing it and trying to catch it again. What we found was embarrassing: These fish learn faster than us humans. With occasional exceptions, trout in Humility Creek do not fall for a fly twice in the same year.

Somewhere along the banks, however, there is usually a better fisherman. The heron moves in geologic time. I cannot keep up with its slowness. My attention wanders. But when I look again, the great gangly bird has a squirming rainbow in its beak.

Heron is the teacher. He does not fish on general principles

and neither do you, his student -- not unless you want a humility lesson. You sneak up on one particular trout till you can see its spots. You figure out that it is taking sulfur duns in the surface film, and then you offer the fly it expects to see. You watch first and cast later.

The same is true for every other problem on the place, too. You don't just do something. You stand there. But you keep your eyes open, like the great blue heron.

Learning to See

Take our lazy-man's lawn, for example. After an adjoining field burned, we developed a keen interest in the fire-break around our house, and from there one thing led to another. The white-tailed deer -- supposedly browsers -- spent winter nights cropping the grass. In return they left genuine organic fertilizer pellets, which revived growth early in spring. And that ring of green lawn turned into a circus.

The opening act was a snipe (presumably female) who trundled over the short grass, pursued by others (presumably male) who acted like jerks. She pretended to ignore them. At about the same time, several killdeer appointed themselves night watchmen, and a pair of spotted sandpipers hatched young so tiny that they could barely navigate through the dandelions. The harrier took an interest in the chicks but I shooed him off.

Conclusion: One weedy lawn per sixty acres creates an edge-effect, attracting wildlife. It is not a problem and does

not need fixing.

But you seldom get so lucky. A farm is, by definition, an ecology altered to feed humans, and you have to remember where you fit in the food chain. You don't take possession, exactly, but you take responsibility.

There are stories -- some accurate -- about folks who love the pretty purple flowers on their construction site. And no wonder. Knapweed is the most carefree ground-cover there is, short of the plastic stuff in stadiums. With knapweed, you needn't worry about harriers eating sandpipers. There are no sandpipers. There isn't much wildlife of any kind.

Our backpack sprayer controls knapweed and other noxious Eurasian plants, but it's a never-ending job. The trick is to work up a warlike mood. Our teenager would be good at spot-spraying if he weren't busy at his computer, zapping aliens from outer space. I'm stuck with the kind here on the ground.

Managing mud

The spring creek has also been labor-intensive. Most of the willows along its course are gone now, and all of the native grayling. They lost their cool, deep habitat when cattle knocked down the banks and widened the channel.

Experiments taught us a method of restoration that works in this particular creek. With cheap boards and bailing-wire, you build wing dams -- planks angling downstream across part of the channel. Silt settles out below the wings and watercress

stabilizes the accretion. There are no floods to scour the deposits, so the process repeats year after year. Eventually a vegetated point protrudes into the stream, forming a pool.

If an impartial professor were passing out grades for mud-management, our stream improvements might deserve a B. Maybe even a B+, considering the low cost. In real life, the trout let us know how we're doing -- and they show up whenever a new pool offers shelter from the heron. If you build it, they will come.

Farther down the food chain, life is exuberant. We were watering trees from the creek when we noticed squadrons of Baetis nymphs in our buckets. The name mattered because it meant that the tiny animals were not just bugs. They were beautiful, and they depended on us. We put them back in the stream.

When you find yourself scooping hundreds of mayfly nymphs by accident, it comes as no surprise that the trout are fat. The spring creek's new, sunlit bed may be producing more fish-food than in primitive times. Indeed, the whole farm seems to have more life per acre than the wilderness areas where we fish and hunt. For quantity of fauna from warblers to eagles, this place gets an A.

Innocence lost

The original ecology, however, can never be restored. None of the trout now present are native to the watershed. Neither are the white-tailed deer, who are hard on vegetation, nor the raccoons, who raid ground-nesting birds. The bluegrass on the

banks is an exotic that took hold because it could tolerate heavy grazing. The pheasants are from China. And come to think of it, my wife is Irish.

In the days of Lewis and Clark, large predators would have controlled populations of both smaller predators and big game. Today, the large predators are in this valley are us -- the humans -- and we come equipped with wide-angle lenses. We see woods and fields as islands of tranquility in an ugly urban world. When you zoom in, however, nature is not peaceful and certainly not stable. The white-tailed deer, for example, have outgrown their food supply.

Late on a November afternoon, there comes an opportunity to prune the herd selectively. Deer feed in an open field and I sneak to its edge through brush, reversing the normal habitat of hunter and whitetail. There is time to pick a doe without fawns -- probably one who lost this year's twins but will breed again soon. A bipod keeps the cross-hairs steady on her heart. For some quaint masculine reason I don't want to do this, but she is plump, for a deer, and she will taste better than one of us raunchy old bucks.

Give me a C for management of deer. They are still browsing back the buffaloberry brush, but at least the herd has not built up to a bust.

With ducks, make the grade a D. When I looked up from work just now, the creek was full of green heads, yellow beaks, and wiggles -- mallard drakes in courtship display. Another drake has

just dropped in, wings cupped, orange feet down as if landing in decoys. What concerns me (and the bachelor drakes) is that only one hen has shown up for the party.

I think I know why the hens are scarce. My steady old dog helps me with an annual, informal census, and finding nests is a cinch for him. It may be equally easy for the skunks -- who won't stop on point.

Some good-sized broods nevertheless hatch and reach the stream, where I see Ms. Mallard with eleven fuzzy ducklings the first day, then nine, six, five, three.

The problem is habitat. It favors small predators over prey in ways that cannot be changed much, in a valley with ever more people. More houses produce more roving cats, more fragmented cover for the magpies, and more trees for the great horned owls. It all looks nice, though -- unless you're a duck.

Biologists' studies confirm that ducks are having trouble staying ahead of predation. Trappers could help to even the balance, but low fur prices provide little incentive.

Costs and benefits

We are aiming for the ecology of an old-fashioned farm with small fields, hedgerows, marshes, and trees -- not the best of all possible worlds, but the best available.

Our hay field is in a mixture of alfalfa and grass, which is good for a brood of pheasants but must not be cut before they are off the nest. The other field is in barley, which the deer will

eat if it is left standing too long. When harvested, however, some grain spills on the ground for ducks, pheasants, cranes, geese, and passerine birds.

There are costs. Alfalfa harvested late can lose value, and a field of barley left in stubble is harder to work when spring comes around. You give up a little of the income from other crops to produce wildlife. In economic terms, game is a crop too.

When you hunt or fish, on the other hand, game becomes "God's meat" (Aldo Leopold's term). Your investment was economic; your returns come in a different currency.

Psychic rewards are hard to measure, but perhaps the marketplace shows a way. Diversity outsells monoculture. Land with both wildlife and crops goes for a higher price than a "clean" field. The difference, I suppose, shows how much people like to live with wild things.

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ancient Turtles. June?
Tintage/ind. v. 200

Jan
March

About 1835 words

May - lawn

June - weeds. Turtles

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Game & Fish (or Wildlife) Management

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There's a lot to do on 60 acres.

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Learning to See

May
Take our lazy-man's lawn, for example. After an adjoining field burned, we developed a keen interest in the fire-break around our house, and from there one thing led to another. The white-tailed deer -- supposedly browsers -- spent winter nights cropping the grass. In return they left genuine organic fertilizer pellets, which revived growth early in spring. And that ring of green lawn turned into a circus.

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June? 1966
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