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They Made a Difference

Three profiles

- Theodore Roosevelt
- John Burroughs
- Aunt Mary

THEODORE ROOSEVELT 1858-1919

How to compass this man? He was hunter and naturalist; war hero and winner of the Nobel Prize for peace; wilderness explorer and scholarly historian. His eyes were weak and his vision long. No other President since Thomas Jefferson has had the breadth of Theodore Roosevelt.

No other has done so much to protect wild places, either. When Theodore Roosevelt came to office in 1901, many Americans still saw the wilderness as threatening. After him, much of it would have been claimed and developed. It was our luck to have a great leader when leadership was greatly needed.

And so we remember Theodore Roosevelt as the conservationist who set aside 150 million acres of timberland, doubled the number of national parks, set up fifty game refuges, and created sixteen national mounuments. His face is carved on Mt. Rushmore, but he has a better monument in the ring of mountains around my town. If he had not put them off-limits to development, I would look up there and see a subdivision with trophy houses.

Title

Management

Proper

JOHN BURROUGHS 1837-1921

Funny thing happened in the first years of this century. Americans in the cities came to see nature as Eden -- a place where happy animals lived in balance and harmony. The writers who catered to this readership became known as the "nature-fakers."

John Burroughs blew the whistle. He was the most respected writer on nature of his day, modest and accurate, rooted deep in his Catskill mountains. He saw them, however, not as an imaginary wilderness but a real place with farms and woods, humans and wildlife. There was room in his countryside for "the rod, the gun, the boat, the tent" -- but not for bad sportsmen.

John Burroughs is due for a revival. He provides what we need, at the turn of another century: hope. He shows us how to live in nature and give her, in return, our stewardship. Other writers of his time are better known now, but then we are in another cycle of nature-fakery. The time is right for a man whose countryside is this side of Eden.

AUNT MARY 1876-1964

Mary Melissa Glisan was a great aunt in all respects but size -- five feet and a bit, ninety pounds of wire. "Eats like a sparrow," we all said, and she flew around like one too. She would fry sunfish for us kids but hardly sit down long enough to eat for herself. When my fishing rod needed help, though, she had time to wrap it with waxed linen thread. One day she showed me where the blueberrries hid and how to knock pine knots out of a rotten log. When we got back to the cabin, she made a pie and put the knots in the fireplace and we watched them burn with a pure blue flame.

Every kid ought to have an Aunt Mary. She didn't change the world, but she made what she could out of me.

Title

Proper

(TR extras)

He seized his chance. He had lived in the wild, hunted it, eaten it, thought about it as a resource for the economy and the spirit.

we go for trout and huckleberries, deer and freedom. Those are the trophies of our lives.

The Teddy bear was named after him, but he was no dabbling celebrity.

[Jefferson gave us the Louisiana purchase and]

This president who came to office in 1901 was this century's most important, for those of us who love wild places.

and "damned cowboy" [] (in the words of an enemy). As a retired President, he nearly died exploring a river in the Amazon basin.

Today we are more likely to see people as a threat to nature.

(Burroughs extras)

The countryside he shows us is the best we've got, except in a few large wilderness areas (and don't look for perfection even there).

affected by the presence of man

In time, and at personal cost, he won the debate.

And of course there were books that fed the fantasy.

Epigraph: "A real lover of nature does not love merely the beautiful things which he culls here and there; he loves the earth itself, the faces of the hills and mountains, the rocks, the streams, the naked trees no less than the leafy trees -- a plowed field no less than a green meadow. [continues re beauty]

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(Aunt Mary longer version)

AUNT MARY 1876 - 1964

Mary Melissa [] Glisan was a great aunt in all respects but size -- five feet and a bit, ninety pounds of wire. She had silver hair down to her waist, when it wasn't rolled up in a bun. She was pretty, in the old pictures, engaged to a fellow who was later killed in an accident with horses. Not that she ever told me the story.

"Eats like a sparrow," we all said, and she flew around like one, too. Hardly took time out to eat the sauerkraut and spareribs she cooked for us kids. When my fishing rod needed help, though, she had time to wrap its wounds with waxed linen thread. She had tools for everything, pliers and awl and thimble and such. Kept them in a bag of brown canvas that smelled of another century. She could take care of anything about me that needed fixing.

I knew nothing, not even my ignorance. She showed me how to row a lapstrake boat, bail it with a coffee can, and scale sunfish too small to skin. One day she showed me where the blueberries hid and how knock pine knots out of a rotten log. When we went back to the cabin, she made a pie and a pure blue flame.

I wish every kid in the land had an Aunt Mary. She didn't make much difference in politics, literature, or the cosmic scheme of things, but she made what she could out of me.

Move to a fishing
chpt.

Now in

for left.

TOWN AND COUNTRY

Since all have now become the sonnes of Pleasure,
and every good is measured by the delight which it
produceth, what worke unto men can be more
thankfull than the Discourse of that pleasure
which is most comely, most honest, and giveth the
most liberty...?

Gervase Markham, Country Contentments¹

~~Markham wrote this in~~

Country Contentments have not changed much since 1614.

Nature is always nature, with pleasures and pitfalls that Gervase Markham recognized, and the Romanized Britons before him, and the Greeks before the Romans. There has been country for exactly as long as there has been city. Putting it the other way around, there have been towns ever since farmers could produce food for the market. And there have always been people who moved back and forth between a clamorous town and a countryside that seemed, by comparison, contented.

Markham's way of living, then, had existed before there was an English language and would, so far as anyone could imagine, go on forever. Country folk walked to market; city folk walked to country. Life before farming was forgotten, a land without agriculture inconceivable. The civilized world was in fact mostly rural, with here and there a town for punctuation.

And then in one generation the text became urban.

The change was no revolution, in any sense my grandparents would have accepted. They liked their old life, on both sides of

the family, and moved to a town that was closer to country than to a city of today. There were woods behind the house, and I had a toy hatchet with which I did a George Washington and was disappointed when nobody would believe I'd hacked down that big walnut tree. Didn't matter much anyhow. The city grew up around us, and the country shrank to stories.

Grandpa Carryer told me of his first practice in Missouri, visiting patients in a buggy. His dog coursed beside him in the fields but insisted on stopping for bobwhites, to which the young doctor naturally attended. Made the farmers feel better, he said, if they knew he was eating right, and Lord knows they couldn't pay much.

It was from Grandpa Carryer that I got the skinny legs. He gave me the dusty road too, and the creaky wheels, sweaty horse, and pointer shivering on hidden treasure. Memories came back week by week after Sunday dinners, retrieved for Grandpa's first rapt audience in thirty years. There was the explosive ring of quail and the time his dog worked a trail on and on, over the field and into a thicket where Grandpa Carryer flushed a great bright bird. His pheasant was as remote, for me, as those Jason brought home with the Golden Fleece. I was nine years old and the past all happened on the same stage.

Grandpa Proper started a farmer's magazine, which had to be published somewhere, and of course the presses were in town. We got to his cabin on the lake in summer, though, and his Pfleuger reel educated my thumb. The rod was not what you would call a rod

today -- more like a fencing foil with guides, and me playing Cyrano. We rowed a leaky wooden boat through time with the mist rising and cast red-and-white plugs on silk lines toward a gallant bass.

Consequences came later, at the dock. Grandpa Proper was a Baptist. He believed in individual freedom, the separation of church and state, and total immersion of voluntary, conscious believers. He showed me how to kill quickly with a cut through the spine, then skin my prey, gut it, and push the blood out with my thumbnail.

My father loved Nature too, but not the same nature. Dad read to me of little Killooleet -- William Long's gentle sparrow, who is "kinder to his mate after he has won her, and never lets selfishness or the summer steal away his music; for he knows that the woods are brighter for his singing."² I absorbed that story with my father's love -- and some cognitive dissonance.

Dad felt better in the country, like most city people, and loved it as only a refugee can love refuge. But he never learned how the country worked. During one autumn we lived in the woods and felled small trees, thinking that we were creating a climax forest. The woodlot that warmed my grandfathers had turned into a cathedral forest, for their son in the city, and their sparrow into a chorister. In one generation, nature had transmogrified.

High

If you want a
dependable climate,

NATURE SHOCK

Or

this is the worst in
the world. Try the tropics.
But if you think it is

How to Motivate a Spouse,

And

weather's duty to provide
excitement, the mountain

Other Sagas of Survival

wait in the place. [2]

In the Mountain West

the only TV you will see is an

This is not for everyone.

weather
forecast,]

Once upon a time I grew up in the mountains and, having attained full height (if not sense), went off to New York, Washington D.C., West Africa, Brazil, Ireland, and other soggy lowlands in order to earn my keep. Naturally I sneaked back to the Rockies every time the boss gave me time off. It was an offbeat trip, at the time. Back in the 'sixties a fellow could have the Firehole River all to himself, see nobody but buffaloes at Buffalo Ford, and drive the whole length of the Henry's Fork without meeting a soul unless you count moose, which I don't.

Perhaps the trip from tidewater to high desert would have continued to seem routine, if I hadn't gotten married. My bride was from the southernmost tropic of Ireland -- not as steamy as West Africa or New York or Washington D.C., but within the palm-tree zone, all the same. She shared my enthusiasm for a summer escape to the Rocky Mountains. Not that she had ever been there. We just talked a lot about high country, and the

conversations prompted her to acquire an alpine trousseau. All of the clothing was, in my opinion, fetching, but she did not believe me when I told her everything it would fetch.

I accept full responsibility for the rest of the confusion. I am guilty, as charged, of telling her that Slough Creek was paradise, and I should have added that paradise is never easy to reach. You get there by climbing over a pass with a pack on your back. There are some guardian angels with little pointy noses, too.

To understand ~~what happened~~ next, you have to be aware that there are no snakes, bears, or mosquitoes in Ireland. St. Patrick expelled the snakes (as any Irishman will confirm), thereby making them mythic creatures, terrifying in their absence. The good saint did not get involved with grizzly bears but they are big enough to be terrifying without help. A miserable little creature like the mosquito is hard to notice in this company. Every time I tried to explain, Anna interrupted to ask about the bears and the snakes.

For our hike into Slough Creek, she wore a fetching pair of shorts, thereby making her legs a mosquito cafeteria. (Did you ever try to tell your wife what to wear?) She is about a foot shorter than me, which normally means that I walk a quarter of a mile and then sit on a rock to wait till she catches up. That changed when she was motivated by her first mosquitoes. She disappeared over the pass, leaving me struggling along behind. She reached the campsite, set up the tent, swatted the mosquitoes that had sneaked inside the netting (just a few hundred), and would not emerge till the evening chill had chased off the rest

[Sept]

of them, quite as effectively as St. Patrick could have done it.

The mountains are a piquant sort of paradise. The good news was that we saw no bears or snakes.

Most of us do time in the humid lowlands because because that's where the jobs are, but today more Americans migrate to the high west because that's where the trout are, [and the big game, and six kinds of grouse, and so on.] That's America for you. When our forefathers were forefathering, they did not lay the place out conveniently, so we migrate. This is not a complaint. Flying is a privilege when you don't have feathers.

But you feel odd, at first, and maybe guilty because you are not having fun yet. The mountain west violates the fitness of things. You trade hazy skies and ^{moist} green woods for sharp-edged peaks. The lowlands were intimate; the mountains keep their distance. Their abundance is of a violent, Pleistocene kind. The high-altitude sun exaggerates contrasts of light and shadow, of alkali flats and glacial lakes, of dry gulches and rivers roaring-bright, of hungry grasshoppers and meadows plump with elk. The uplands of Africa feel the same way. ~~Nothing else does.~~

Mind you, I am not promising better fishing, hunting, and hiking than you have at home. The best is what you enjoy most, and most of us enjoy the reassurance of familiar things. Everyone who travels to a foreign country gets culture shock, and the best way to cope with it is to face it. It is, technically, an emotional disturbance. Nature shock is just as unsettling.

Prince Maximillian, one of Montana's first tourists, wrote this while he was floating the upper Missouri in 1833:

"I could not help making comparisons with my journeys

See also for climate

on Brazilian rivers. There, where nature is so infinitely rich and grand, I heard, from the lofty, thick, primeval forests on the banks of the rivers, the varied voices of the parrots, the macaws, and many other birds, as well as of the monkeys, and other creatures; while here, the silence of the bare, dead, lonely wilderness is but seldom interrupted by the howling of the wolves, the bellowing of the buffaloes, and the screaming of the crows. The vast prairie scarcely offers a living creature, except now and then herds of buffaloes and antelopes, or a few deer and wolves. These plains have certainly much resemblance . . . with the African deserts."

Right! and the "desert" have more some than the forest.

The African comparison might have given the Prince a clue as to what was going on. So might the buffaloes, antelope, deer, and wolves, or ^{his} ~~the~~ elk with antlers 4'1" long in a straight line, carrying ten points on a side.

I fell for Maximillian's illusion when I lived in Brazil. With all those trees, there had to be lots of wildlife -- but there wasn't, unless one counted insects. The bigger Brazilian birds and mammals preferred the grasslands. The rain that produced the forests had also leached minerals out of the soil.

There are places in the Rockies where it rains now and then -- I even live in one of them -- but most of the moisture comes as snow, and most of that is caught by the mountains. Snow is "the best fertilizer," as farmers used to call it. It protects plants all winter and then recedes gradually from the lower elevations to the summits, melt-water filling the springs. Then, since water in the ground runs downhill (unlike humidity in the air), last winter's snow shows up in the streams. You fish a

sunny spring creek in the valley and watch next year's stream dropping onto the peaks from a snow-cloud.

There is an unusual thing about the Rockies: mountains and plains are interwoven, with isolated ranges sticking up here and there. We are lucky. The Alps and the Andes are not like that. Those parched valleys winding through the Rocky Mountains are mineral-rich. They produce big trout and big animals. They produce more of everything, except air and trees. You miss the thick deciduous trees but not the thick air. The first thing you notice about high-altitude breathing is that your hay fever has gone and things smell fresh. It feels strange, at first. You knew how to simmer with dignity, but dry-roasting is a new sensation. You are not imagining things. High-altitude sun does affect you in a different way. You need to change your defenses, starting with your clothes. You would worry intuitively about a mountain winter, but cold air is much the same everywhere because it cannot hold much humidity. The wet and dry ways of getting hot are different. I don't think I've ever seen them explained.

When you go fishing -- or early-season hunting -- on a summer day in humid country, your problem is that your body cannot rid itself of the heat it generates. That's because sweat is slow to evaporate in air that is already full of moisture. You try to decrease the load by wearing clothes that are designed for letting heat escape -- like shorts. All of your clothes should be designed to let heat out.

In dry country the problem is to keep heat from getting in. You still generate some of your own, of course, but a bigger problem is solar gain from that unfiltered sun. When you step out

of it, into the shade of a tree, you find instant comfort. But you may not find as many trees along your favorite high-altitude stream, so you carry your own shade. One scientist suggests that humans developed large brains because the sun damaged so many brain cells during hot-weather hunts. This evolution, however, took millennia. You and I don't have time to wait for natural replacement of cooked cells, so we want a big hat -- maybe a straw one like the cowboys wear. It scares trout faster than anything except a kid throwing rocks, so you learn to crawl. You get trout or comfort but perhaps not both.

That Yellowstone evening makes another point about dry climates: they swing fast. Back east, if you are sweating and slapping mosquitoes all day, you may have to do the same all night. Not in the high country. Heat that comes from direct solar gain swings with the sun. In the Rockies, the summer temperature commonly drops thirty or forty degrees on a clear night, and most nights are clear. You put on a wool shirt. If there is wind, you put on a light nylon shell. On the east coast, the average drop on a summer night is about half as great, and you need a raincoat more than a windbreaker.

You may hear that you should let your eyes cope in nature's way, without sunglasses. If you were not already wary of quacks telling you about nature's way, get suspicious now. The eskimos did not adopt eye protection because Yves St. Laurent made spectacles look chic. Bright sun turns unprotected eyes red and itchy. Same with unprotected skin. It is perfectly natural, like fried brains, but faster.

You can also avoid nature shock by taking your home

environment with you. Last summer a car with California plates pulled up by a little pond where I was smelling swamp and listening to ^{yellow-headed} * blackbirds tootling like toy trains. I was also catching brook trout that weighed nearly a pound, but when anybody was looking I was pretending that the fishing was bad. I stood there looking bored and watched a busy couple jumped from the car. The man shouldered his camcorder while the woman hooked it up to the car by an umbilical cord. He panned the scene carefully while she narrated. The car idled, air-conditioner compressor clicking on and off. Maybe when they got home they sat down and looked at where they had been.

Like doctors, some fishermen give advice without taking humidity into account. I know a beginning fisherman in the east who was persuaded to spend big money for sunglasses even before he owned waders. His new specs would have been good for Montana: they had photochromic lenses with real glass surfaces. I, at least, can't use such glasses in the east. Photochromic lenses darken quickly, but they take a long time to lighten in color. When I walk into the shadow with them, I can't see the fish. The best thing under humid skies is a pair of plastic polarizing clip-ons. These cheap lenses can be flipped up without delay. But they don't provide enough protection in the west, except on the occasional dark day.

[If there is anyone that I have not insulted, let me know and I will try to correct the omission. I would like to get you so worked up that you take a look.]

wet climate and escape (or will when you can) to a high, dry one. That's America for you. When our forefathers were forefathering, they had bigger problems than laying the place out conveniently for sportsmen. So today we migrate about as often as the geese, but in a different direction.

Mind you, this is not a complaint. Flying is a privilege when you don't have feathers. And when you're grounded, the fishing near home is good anyhow, because you're prepared for it. You know how to manage the expeditio

[If you are planning to make the trip, there are some things you might like to think about. I know easterners who can cross the Atlantic comfortably, but not the Missouri. Europe is a great place to go, for cities and museums. In Europe you get culture

Jan

shock. In the Rockies you get nature shock.

I will not speak to you of comfort. You can find it anywhere; a dude ranch in Montana has the same soft springs and numb television as a resort in Pennsylvania. But comfort is a flaccid thing. The lowlands are for comfort; the mountains are for stress.]

Laws made in Washington still assume that big Douglas firs are renewable resources (which they are, given four hundred years without acid rain, greenhouse effect, fire suppression, or grazing).

[keep heat out/let it out]

[nature shock/culture shock]

[more of everything except trees and air]

The west was cut up to fit eastern ideas. They brought us the dust-bowl, the dams, the mines, the tree-cutters and the tree-huggers. Easterners could not imagine what would happen to dry land when native sod was turned wrong-side-up by a plow. If you read the national press, you might suppose that western resources are land, crops, cattle, trees, and recreation. Those are all derivative. The fundamental western resource is water. You wouldn't think of that if you live where it rains.

Mind you, we western boys have done no better when left to our own devices. We find it difficult to hit a compromise between wilderness areas and overgrazing. We waste tons of topsoil to grow every bushel of the wheat we can't sell. We get rich and get out or go broke and ask for help. We grow too lazy to ride and start hunting from pickup trucks. We have more rivers, fish, and game than anyone else, so we squabble over them. We are good at

fighting and bad at negotiating.

The man from humid country descends from farmers -- moderate, tolerant, skeptical, down-to-earth. The Constitution is our national law * but could only have evolved in the east. The man of the high desert is intense, heedless,* believing, exalted. The cowboy is our national hero but could only have evolved in the west.

You have that strange hot/cold, dry/wet, high/low, steep/flat country to get used to.

The high west is a mixture of heaven and hell like everywhere else, but the angels have not quite lost the fight yet. You ought to have a look while there is still time.

In the lowlands, the air is wet but the streams get low every summer. Mountain air is dry but the streams run full.

In the lowlands, streams run warm. Humid skies act like a greenhouse, letting the sun's rays through to heat the earth and water but then hinerling the outward [longwave] radiation of heat. Clear mountain air lets the water's warmth radiate into the atmosphere at night. [But temperate, moist, ocean-influenced climates are good, especially if the terrain is steep. Applies to Britain, Ireland, some other parts of Europe, New Zealand, Tasmania, and Patagonia. Per Ray White's Wisconsin publication.]

Perhaps leaching explains why the Rocky Mountains, strictly speaking, are not very fertile. The Indians who lived in the peaks were impoverished because game preferred the plains. When the vast herds were wiped out a century ago, the elk retreated to the mountains -- but they return to the plains in winter if they can.

During hot weather in the Atlantic states, for example, you may prefer visors -- not hats -- so that sweat can evaporate from the top of your head (a major heat-producer).

The thin air has other consequences. When you show the slides you took in Yellowstone Park together with those you took during a lowland summer, the latter will look as if you had mud on your lens. Pictures taken through dry air are clear, sunny, and full of sharp colors.

If you can stand it, however, leave your camera home and use your five senses.

The mountain sun -- with no humid air to filter it -- pounds down on you as brightly as on a camera.

1/25/98

About 5,435 words

a Wetland that's 2/3 dry
was a wild land that has been farmed
for a century.

JANUARY

in winter

[Picture: Winding stream, trout rising]

SNEAKING A LOOK

HOME

WET PLACE IN A DRY CLIMATE

OLD GROWTH

NOT JUST A SWAMP

WILDNESS

~~HABITAT, HABITAT, HABITAT~~

HEARTH

forming?

SNEAKING A LOOK

Our first map of the farm has "sneak on" inked in the margin and an X about where our house stands these eighteen years later. My informant was a good guy -- the kind you find in a fly shop, healthy mind in a healthy body working for peanuts. I drove to the wiggly blue line he had confided, wondering what stream would be worth sneaking in an area with the Madison, Gallatin, and Yellowstone Rivers, all open to the public and at that time not crowded.

The spring creek was clear and full where it flowed under the bridge, and framed by watercress beds. A squadron of baby teal scooted after mayflies riding the current in dozens, maybe hundreds -- no, thousands on the water or above it, sunbeams with wings. They ran the gauntlet of ducklings, slid down a silver run, and eddied round a polkadot pool. Feeding trout made the loudest sound in the picture.

I turned, slammed the car door, and drove off with a pheasant sassing me from the brush. Climbing the barbed-wire fence would have been easy, but my rental car would have had to sit shamefaced on the gravel road and who but a fisherman would be there?

Next news from the future came in Lisbon, of all places, over a casserole of white beans with sausage and tripe. There were still no cafés like this back home, said my visitor from Montana, but he had heard of a farm out in the valley that was up for sale. It had a spring creek with a big bend where ducks poured in like wine from our pitcher, he said, and maybe I could bring that casserole recipe with me.

Soon after our return from Portugal, Anna and I went to see the trout-and-duck-and-pheasant place. We saw white-tailed and mule deer, too, and great blue herons, garter snakes, and fields of wild iris. Sandhill cranes, Canada geese, and sora rails were the birds we heard, or those of the season whose voices I recognized. Much of the rest of nature was waiting for names. Some of it still is, fifteen years later.

HOME

All things seek their origins.

Aristotle, Physics

Our new place seemed empty to Anna. She had grown up in southernmost Ireland -- across an ocean, mild of climate, and full of houses.

This was home for me. My family had lived in Yellowstone Park when I was growing up and I had worked summers in the back-country, clearing trails and packing mules and getting paid for what I wanted to do anyhow. When time came to pay back, this small farm was as close as I could get and still find enough good wildlife habitat.

To grasp the place, relax your hand and rest it back-down on your knee. Our sixty acres are in the valley of your palm between the lifeline, which is a river, and the wrinkle of a spring-creek tributary. The natural surround is sinuous stream, shapeless thickets, and paths made by deer or me. I am not always sure who is leading whom, but my feet often follow the stream. Deer, on the other hand, connect a source of food -- the lawn, say -- to their daytime hideouts in buffalobrush.

Don't blame yourself if you get turned around in here. For a line you can count on, just get in your car and follow the county road, straight as any the Romans built. It does, however, have washboard bumps that might slow you enough to notice our place. Careful: A skittish whitetail might jump the barbed wire and wind up in your lap. The house will not leap out at you, though, and there are no Scotch pines or split-rail fences. The landscape has not been landscaped.

Your real lover of nature does not love merely the beautiful things which he culls here and there; he loves the earth itself, the faces of the hills and mountains, the rocks, the streams, the naked trees He does not know what it is that draws him. It is not beauty, any more than it is beauty in his father and mother that makes him love them.

John Burroughs¹

Just now I was working while Anna, beside me on the couch, riffled through Smithsonian magazine for a piece on ballet. I did not want to be distracted, but an impressionist painting jumped from her pages into my peripheral vision. Childe Hassam's landscape caught me in a fraction of a second, though she kept looking for her dancers.

This farm has pages for both of us, but the images are not striking. Thomas Moran would have found nothing sublime to paint on our flat acres. Gainsborough would have seen nothing

picturesque. Perhaps van Gogh could have made something of sun lancing from a riffle, piercing twisted willows. An artist would have to deal with light, anyhow, and even in winter the pattern is intricate -- short strokes of sunny grass by a chrome-flecked stream.

But that was my page, not Anna's. She is outside now, pruning her cinquefoils, which are dormant in January. The plants look like sprays of dead sticks and she looks like an 8 with dark hair that has no gray in it, not so you'd notice.

Farther out, on a land splashed with white, there is a brown► and then another, flying off in different directions. The arrows are dogs named Huckleberry and Tess, and they live in a world of scents.

Leading from the rear is a figure whose mop of hair disappears against the snow. The rest of me is designed to hide behind a cottonwood trunk. I am, graphically, an !

This family, as you see, is diverse. Anna has better things to do than roam the fields, what with my shocking neglect of house and garden. She buys the groceries too, and takes care of whatever other shopping needs to be done, plus some that doesn't. The dogs follow their noses, which lead away from town, and I tag along. In January, with the leaves down and grass flattened, I can see the place in big pieces.

Huck and Tess know more than me because smells cannot hide. Weasel, rabbit, fox, deer -- something has always been there. The dogs could give any of the above a good run, too, if the leader

of their pack permitted. Tess is a dizzy pup and might be tempted to chase, but Huckleberry and I are teaching her family values.

Our mission on this day is to see how wildlife is doing after a storm that has covered the spilled grain. Huck hits scent by the creek's bank, where sun has thawed a patch of south-facing grass. He creeps closer, points, and holds till I flush a strong-flying hen pheasant. Baby Tess by then is walking stiff-legged in a thicket of tall buffaloberry bushes. I walk in as if I had confidence in her, though I suspect that she is fooling around with a magpie, and am delighted when a cock pheasant flushes over my head and knocks snow down on me. He has been feeding on the dried berries.

Winter is the season when a pheasant needs most calories and finds fewest. The barley is hidden, the grasshoppers are long dead, and rose hips are low in nutrition, so the rooster leaves his normal environment for a meal up there with the tree sparrows and sharp-tailed grouse.

WET PLACE IN A DRY CLIMATE

[The river] passes through a smooth extensive green meadow of fine grass in its course meandering in several streams.... a high wide extensive plain succeeds the meadow and extends back several miles from the river.... and a distant range of lofty mountains ran their snowclad tops above the irregular and broken mountains which lie adjacent to this beautiful spot.

Captain Meriwether Lewis, ~~1806~~ []

July 27, 1805

To see where this land's wealth accumulates, look beyond our boundaries. The foothills are dirt-gray on their lowest slopes, which are in winter fallow; then yellow, where sun shines on wheat stubble; and tan where pasture takes over. But don't stop there. Let your eyes follow a line of dark timber from the top edge of cultivation up through a canyon to callused ridges and on to white peaks with clouds walking on them.

One day the winds will shift. Instead of knifing down from the Gulf of Alaska they will waft from Hawaii and some of the drifts will melt on warm afternoons and flow underground or above, trickles becoming waterfall, torrent, river, marsh, and hayfield. We put water to work down here in the valley, but most of it does not fall here. The ^{mountain} ~~high country~~ catches rain and dawn for us, and sunset and snow.

On a large-scale map, our place is high desert. In reality,

Preserving Montana wetlands; their value to us

Montana's wetlands provide vital breeding habitats for wildlife, help to protect our communities from the effects of flooding and provide natural filtering of pollutants.

For many years, wetlands were drained or filled to make the land suitable for crops or buildings. Now, scientists have realized that wetlands serve several important functions:

- They recharge wells and aquifers by holding water long enough to allow the water to percolate into underlying soil, replenishing groundwater supplies. Sponging up large volumes of water and releasing it is especially important during low-flow periods of the year.
- Wetlands enhance water quality by holding sediments and toxins. They also naturally purify water by absorbing nutrients such as nitrogen.
- Naturally, wetlands provide wildlife habitat for thousands of ducks, geese, shorebirds and swans as well as other mammals, reptiles, amphibians, fish and shellfish species. Freshwater fish need shallow water to spawn, shelter and feed. Thirty-five percent of threatened and endangered species are found in or are dependent on wetlands.
- Wetlands help organic matter to decompose, incorporating nutrients back into the food chain. Vegetation supported by wetlands acts as a flood buffer and helps to stabilize shorelines.



When Kerr Dam was relicensed in 1985, Montana Power—working in conjunction with state and federal agencies and the tribes—started studying ways to mitigate the effects of loss of habitat due to erosion along the north shore of Flathead Lake. To replace that loss, last year we purchased two ranches northwest of Kalispell: the Lost Trail Ranch (7,800 acres) and the McGregor Meadow Ranch (800 acres).

irrigation ends here
We plan to enhance wetland habitat on these ranches by removing irrigation ditches, restoring wetland vegetation, and improving water management practices. We're also funding habitat, wetland mitigation and restoration along Flathead Lake's north shore to the tune of \$750,000. In addition, we are going to restore 37 acres of wetlands west of the Flathead River.

The Lost Trail Ranch not only provides important wetland habitats, but also supports an abundance of other species, such as bald eagles, grizzly bears and other big game. Turning it into a wildlife refuge will benefit several species of wildlife.

By the end of the year, we plan to convey about half of the Lost Trail Ranch to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The balance will be purchased by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service or a conservation buyer. All of the McGregor Meadow Ranch except a few acres with buildings also will be conveyed to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Montana Power views wetlands as an important natural resource, and we're helping to protect and restore them.

Building or remodeling booklet may help you

At The Montana Power Company, we're committed to providing you with the fastest, most convenient service possible when installing your new electric or natural gas service. Our newest publication, New Service Guide, can help make your next renovation or construction project a success.

Targeted at home builders acting as their own general contractor, this booklet gives them step-by-step information for making the service request, receiving a cost estimate and preparing the site properly. Call or e-mail your nearest Montana Power new construction office for a copy today.

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(800) 371-8666

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Phone: 582-4664 or
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Phone: 497-2660 or
(800) 701-2660

Email: ButteNCD@mtpower.com

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Phone: 454-7189 or
(800) 940-1231

Email: GreatFallsNCD@mtpower.com

Havre Area

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(800) 510-7876

Email: HavreNCD@mtpower.com



Montana Energy

Vol. 18 • June 1998 • No. 6

**Helpful information
for our customers**

This issue:

- **Electrical safety questions answered**
- **Restoring wetlands**
- **Building or remodeling? New booklet will help**
- **Annual report available**
- **Mark your calendar for free symphony**

More answers to electrical safety questions

- **What's the story behind the saying "water and electricity don't mix?"**

It seems as if we're constantly reminded to never touch appliances, outlets or wires with wet hands or feet, but why?

Electricity, when properly confined within the wires of a tool or cord, is considered safe. If that tool becomes wet, however, the water can provide an alternate path for the electricity to seek the ground, which it always tries to do. That path may be through the casing of the tool and your body.

Don't leave appliances plugged in where they might come into contact with



water. If an appliance does fall into water, **NEVER** reach in the water to pull it out—even if it's turned off. Always unplug the appliance first. If you have an appliance that has been immersed in water, don't attempt to use it again until it has been checked by a qualified repair person. Also, never use electrically-operated power tools in the rain or in wet conditions.

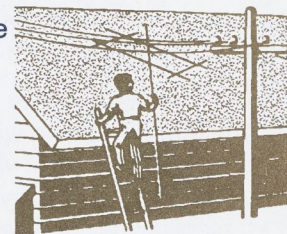
- **Aren't power lines insulated? Why should I worry about them?**

Most power lines are not insulated—it would be too costly to do so, and the extra weight of the insulation would be a problem. Some service-drop lines into

houses and businesses are insulated, but that insulation is for protection from the weather only—not for personal protection. Snow, ice, wind, and sunlight can easily deteriorate this non-protective layer of insulation.

Keep ladders, antennas and tools away from all power lines, including service lines. If you do need to get close to a line, call us.

We'll be glad to work with you to make sure the situation is safe or disconnect the power temporarily, if possible. If you're concerned about power lines through trees, give us a call. We'll check it out.



Write or call for your free copy of Montana Power's annual report

The Montana Power Company has just issued its 1997 annual report, which chronicles the company's past financial performance and yearly developments. It also projects what lies ahead, explaining where the company is headed and how deregulation is anticipated to affect the company and our customers.

For a copy of the annual report, please call 1-800-245-6767 or e-mail us at stock@mtpower.com.

we have no desert species ^{but some} ~~and a little~~ of everything else: ducks, geese, and swallows; muskrats, turtles, and ^{Sculpins} minnows; dogwoods, chokecherries, and honeysuckles. We live on a wet land with dry air.

But forget about land. Land is a cultural construct inherited from Europe and eastern America. Captain Lewis learned to focus on water even in 1806, writing of ^{peaks} ~~snowclad mountains~~ that gave moisture shape and sent it along to stream, river, and smooth green meadow. ↩

Water makes wildlife corridors that wind down from the mountains, ~~and keep our place functioning as part of something bigger.~~ Water ~~makes flood plains too,~~ which grow ^s trees, brush, and cattails, ~~which hide things great and small.~~ Water ties wildness together. Water is the universal solvent and the indispensable lifeline. ~~Water is in the blood of us all, animals, plants, and earth.~~

Ask the American merganser. He is practicing natural selection on young trout just now, and who needs land? All he wants is two banks to hold the water together.

Ask my Irish wife. Back home, the rain fell from Heaven.

Takes getting used to, this place where water comes up from the ground.

Ask me. It's water that gives me the pheasant, and the barley, and the curve of the fish-duck's dive.

See next page

OLD GROWTH

The world today is sick to its thin blood for lack of elemental things, for fire before the hands, for water welling from the earth, for the dear earth itself underfoot.

Henry Beston, The Outermost House

? ~~Our biggest old-growth brush and trees~~ ^{and bushes} hide a pool of dark, transparent water. ^E opposites in one. You kneel, shade your eyes, and wait till a shadow ^{with} ~~takes~~ life down there. Once I tried a cast and was rejected, but the trout showed itself clearly. A fish of this girth would have been half out of water running up ^{snipe creek, Shet} through the spring that flows from the pool.

Small as it is, however, the tiny stream is free of ice on the coldest winter nights, and here a small bird lives on the margin. The snipe is a specialized predator with long, sensitive bill designed to probe for tiny prey. The soil, though, must not be frozen. A cold spell can starve marsh birds even in Louisiana, where many migrate in the winter. And yet this one has bet on the same Montana mud I chose. I will not pass out tame food -- and could not if I wished, because snipe refuse hand-outs -- but I know where this one hunts and will stay away, when dogs and I

[4 stream for the whole day
a cool place

check on the other residents. And then when the whole place thaws I will pay another visit, and I am betting that the bird will still be here. Spring water will not let us down.

A second spring feeder -- Pheasant Creek -- enters our place from the south, merging with both Snipe Creek and the mainstream at Junction Pool. And a little further downstream, ~~a third~~ ~~miniature spring creek called~~ Buffaloberry Run flows in from the east. Come summer, the water from this point down will shelter and feed big trout.

The flow is at its lowest in January, however, and the mats of watercress have died back, leaving only a few pools where sizable fish feel secure. Others have moved down to deep water in the river. A trout without a good roof can count on the heron to drop in.

Deer The spring feeders pass through ~~besky~~ twenty acres which are, in turn, the locus of wildlife for all of our land and some that borders it. The old growth has survived this century simply because the south twenty was too wet to plow and too brushy for cattle.

Come summer, though, you can sit here in shade of a cottonwood and watch whatever show is playing. Baby ducks are at my level, enthusiastic and not too wary. The pheasant has ~~all the colors of nature~~ when you catch him shining through his jungle, but a glimpse is all you get. Pheasants never let down their guard.

Deer, on the other hand, can be stalked in these woods. I've

done it, just to learn the discipline, but crawling through the leaves was slow and I did not have the patience of a mountain lion. Indian bow-hunters would have had enough sense to sit and wait. They might not have had the big trees to lean against -- beavers would have kept the cottonwoods down -- but the gnarled alders were here then, and thorny buffalobrush, and snowberry bushes jostling for space.

Some of the willows look old too, though I cannot judge their age by cutting sections and counting rings in the usual way. New stems push up in the middle of a clump, forcing the oldest to the outside where they die, dry, and subside, in slow motion. The green growth is ringed in time by battlements of fallen ancestors.

Limbs that dry without decay tell you something about this country. Things rot alive in the tropics and soon afterward in humid America and Europe, but here, perhaps, I could lie at the foundation of our house and rattle my bones at progress till the next ice age. This would be death to good purpose.

Meanwhile I am the custodian of a mixed woodland with qualities that younger habitat cannot match. The fallen limbs of one willow, for example, offer shelter to a hen pheasant. I see her tracks in fresh snow, then flush a great horned owl waiting in buffalobrush just yards away. It is the same owl that claims our chimney at night, and it will stay here through the winter, hunting actively in the dark and opportunistically during the day. I turn away from the brush, hoping that the pheasant will

dash to our barley stubble for a feed, then return to shelter before she is eaten in turn. She lives between starvation and the owl.

The February thaw will begin another cycle. Snow will melt down here in the valley, then cover the grass and melt again, and over lengthening days the thaw-line will creep up toward bare rock on the highest peaks. But as the snowpack shrinks, the water table will rise and replenish the springs. The creek will, as it happens, reach peak flow and clarity in summer, just when the river is low and muddied by water returning to it from irrigation ditches.

The spring creeks, in short, are countercyclical -- and so are those of us who live near it. Why stay in the mainstream, when it runs low and turbid?

NOT JUST A SWAMP

'Taint only des a swamp; it's sump'n' wuss'n dat.
You kin stan' in de middle un it, an' mos' hear it
ketch its breff, an' dat's what make I say dat
'taint no swamp, fer all it look like one.

Joel Chandler Harris, The Complete Tales
of Uncle Remus²

In the time before fences, when this was not a place at all, the stream wrote its story in a braille you can read with your boots. The oldest channels are now dry, grassy swales underfoot. Cattails line bends where the current flowed in Captain Lewis's time, and there you may sink to your ankles in marsh. But it is a natural marsh. In the main creek you need hip boots, even for the sunny riffles where water runs over gravel. And for the deep pools, use chest waders. You may find yourself in mud -- civilization's deposit.

When a writer calls a land young, he usually means that people have not had time to make a mess of it. This place has been irrevocably changed by Americans of European extraction, and yet it is adolescent in geological time. At the end of the last

ice age, glaciers melted and filled the valley, creating a great lake. And then, over ten thousand years, streams filled the lake with rubble, which was colonized by marsh vegetation, which in turn built up dark, silty loam three or four feet deep.

The glacial lake is called an aquifer, now that it has been buried, but it remains where it has always been, at a constant temperature of 50° Fahrenheit (10° Celsius). We use it for heating -- more on that in February -- then return the water.

We have also removed rubble deposited in a fragment of the aquifer during the last few ticks of the geological clock. The result is Gallatin Lake: too big a name for the pond, but accurate. Rainbow trout now swim where the detritus of mountains used to be. Sometimes the trout even spawn successfully, though there is no current.

As fishery, the pond would have brought blessed relief in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., where we lived for a while. Here in the ring of mountains, still water is very slow stuff. But though experienced anglers head for the moving stream, the pond attracts underprivileged children -- the kind who have yet to catch a fish.

As stage, moreover, Gallatin Lake is fully booked. Look out any dawn when the water is ice-free -- beginning with the vernal equinox, roughly -- and you see ringbill ducks coasting in, rainbows ascendant, or perhaps a muskrat cutting lines on the calm surface, for lack of anything better to do. Muskrats have no imagination, but they have energy to spare and work it off

doodling.

The main stream and its feeders wriggle a mile or so, on just sixty acres. Start anywhere and a few paces will take you to the edge of something else -- barley, alfalfa (lucerne), grass, brush, trees, marsh, or water. None of this is tidy, but wildlife has a short commute between shelter and food. The hen pheasant sneaks from willows to barley and back with minimum exposure. The kingbird will sit on any of thousands of branches, next summer, and dart out for midges hatching in the stream. The doe will browse while her fawn lies in snowberries. The mallard will hide her brood in the chain speedwell yet call them to water in seconds when the fox shows up.

If starvation is rare, however, predation is intense: a conclusion based on research by Dr. Huckleberry. He brings me wings of mallards, at this time of the year, and sometimes of pheasants. Most die at night, when the great horned owl, fox, raccoon, and skunk hunt best. Trout get in trouble when the heron has good hunting light. I have not seen a mink hunting muskrats, but one big muskrat was carrying off a dead young one of his own species, probably for dinner.

It was this side of nature that Uncle Remus heard when the swamp caught its breath. And it was Aldo Leopold [] who explained the importance of edges to wildlife. When he wrote, though, small predators were scarce. Today they are abundant, and it turns out that edges give predators an edge over prey. Fox, raccoon, skunk, owl, red-tailed hawk, goshawk, and more: They use narrow

corridors of cover to sneak close before the final dash or pounce or stoop.

A falcon, towering in her pride of place,
Was by a mousing owl hawk'd at and kill'd.

Shakespeare, Macbeth

A voice from the chimney reminds me that my title to the land has an expiration date. "Who?" asks the great horned owl. "Who? Who, who, who? Whoooo?" It never says when.

My territory is bigger than the owl's. I may bog down here sometimes -- when it comes to paying taxes or fighting poison hemlock -- but my legs spring me. They need mountains too, and prairies, evergreen ridges, and rocky streams fast as the spring creek is slow. The high country is mine, vast round wet dry open wooded rocky places. I have claimed them with my bootprints. I have made walking purchases.

Understand this hold on nature: Access to the high country is my fifth freedom. There are more of my bootprints in the vast, varied public lands on my horizon than on my own snip of flat earth. I would not know what to do on these sixty acres if public lands had not taught me.

It might not have happened. It would not have happened, but for a leader who could turn history around. There would have been some public lands in the west anyhow -- the ones nobody wanted -- but President Theodore Roosevelt's decisions account

for the diversity, the scale, and the mission, all of which were colossal. The mission in turn produced Aldo Leopold, father of American wildlife management, who learned his job in National Forests. *Few others*

Let the mountains claim me, then. My sun comes up over the Bridger Range, then swings over the Absarokas, Gallatins, Spanish Peaks, Madison Range, and Tobacco Roots. Montana's explorers rose to the occasion when they had this horizon to name. Nobody thought, back then, that humans would have to look after the high country.

Merge next section with this.

WILDNESS

The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the World.... I believe in the forest, and in the meadow, and in the night in which the corn grows.

Thoreau, "Walking"

Of thicket there are twenty acres; of meadow more; of corn eight. And then there is the night in which the deer feed -- frequently on our hay. This is Wildness. Thoreau would not like the sounds of progress, but they are as distant from me as the train was from him. He would not like the country fenced off in squares, or the roads, cars, airport, and houses. As to nature, however, he would notice more deer, geese, cranes, ducks, and trout than he saw near Walden Pond. This valley is more fertile than his piece of New England, [or another one where I spent four years, not far away.] *and less civilized. Thoreau*

Wildness, then, is still within reach. You can muddy your boots in it any weekend, if you live in town, or any hour if you live in the country. Hurry up, though. The legs I still have carried me through five eastern states full of wildlife in the 'fifties, 'sixties and 'seventies, but by then hedgerows were being cut, swamps filled, and fields squared. You could walk out

after fresh snow and find not even a mouse track. Urban sprawl was the leading cause of rural decline, followed by farms that had become food-factories in order to survive.

The experience of managing land for wildlife crops has the same value as any other kind of farming; it is a reminder of the man-earth relation.

Aldo Leopold³

Our land is managed for wildlife, but it is not a game farm like those that raise deer and elk behind fences. Such animals are not hunted by the rules of fair chase and are therefore not really game but products of commerce. Their meat may be sold legally and their antlers bring high prices in the orient, where they are ground and sold to stiffen the resolve of human males. (He was a brilliant salesman who put that one over.)

Venison-farming might produce more dollars per acre than anything else on this place. But not on my watch. The captive animals might transmit diseases -- or unwanted genes -- to wild populations nearby. Our fences are low and easy to cross.

This is no trout farm, either. Fish move upstream and down with the seasons, seeking shelter and food. The brown trout at least feed discretely, but the rainbows get you talking to yourself. Their piece of the West is but another name for the Wild. Here in the family we began speaking of Humility Creek -- a reflection on the eyes of fly-fishers slinking homeward.

Leopold thought through all of this and Thoreau would not be

confused, after traveling widely in Concord, but modern urban readers may have trouble conjugating the wild. Let me make it harder.

Unlike African and Eurasian mammals, which coevolved with humans and learned to fear us as we slowly developed our hunting skills over millions of years, most American big mammals suddenly encountered humans when our hunting skills were already highly advanced.... They would have been easy prey, quickly exterminated by the first Americans.

Jared Diamond⁴

I am a native American, in the original (and Constitutional) sense of the word, which comes from the Latin verb meaning "to be born." I was born here. But my ancestors came from the old world, and in this sense I am an exotic -- as are the brown trout, pheasants, barley, hay, and a great many other things on this place. Brook trout probably got here by rail from the east coast, and rainbow trout from the west. White-tailed deer and raccoons may have hiked in when farms created suitable habitat.

Gray wolves, on the other hand, were here once and will return -- but they will not reoccupy their old niche because the old wild community is no longer here. Wild bison have been replaced by domestic cattle, or in some cases by fenced-in bison, which are equally off-limits to wolves.

In all this the only constant is change. It will continue, and I will stay involved. Nobody else is out here most days watching, trying, failing, succeeding, and wearing out gloves.

Weep for paradise lost, if you will, but be consistent. Wish yourself away, if you can read these words, because English is a foreign language and America an imported idea. My ancestors, and perhaps yours, got here by ship and brought with them the tools called plows. The farmer's whole business is to persuade Ms. Nature to do what she has not tried before.

Wish yourself away if your ancestors walked across the land bridge, too. They came from Siberia not long ago, as nature keeps time, and hunted to extinction the biggest of big game.

There is guilt to go around, then, but no Eden for a retreat. And Americans do not want Eden anyhow. We want wildlife we can live with, and we've got it. On these sixty acres, the most conspicuous wild mammals -- deer -- are not threatened by extinction, as they were in Theodore Roosevelt's time, but by their own abundance. Their success is shared in some degree by most of the great conspicuous creatures, with the possible exception of grizzly bears, which are fewer now than in Captain Lewis's time but abundant enough to sell many canisters of pepper spray.

Let's not exhaust our enthusiasm, then, on animals which already have so many admirers that managers of public lands are afraid to manage. We ^{will} ~~shall~~ have the wildlife we want. Let's remember to want small, reclusive, natives -- animals seldom seen from roads or nature trails. Let's save a place for railbirds and tadpoles, and phalaropes and ^{frogs} ~~bats~~.

merge w/ previous

HABITAT, HABITAT, HABITAT

Habitat destruction is the primary threat to the diversity of life.... affecting 88% of all [endangered and threatened] species.

Nature Conservancy Magazine⁵

To judge what good wildlife habitat is not, look at a golf course. The monoculture of groomed, fertilized, sanitized grass may feed a few inconvenient deer, geese, and ground squirrels, but for diversity, watch the humans exercising their carts. (Campaign pledge: Make me Benevolent Despot and golf courses will revert to wild habitat.)

For the opposite extreme, jump to wilderness. It will take a long jump, because high cold leftovers are what remain of the original West. They have always been, and still are, places for hunters and gatherers to forage -- public land mostly, because government of the people, by the people, and for the people could not find people who wanted to live up there.

You there in the front row: You have not visited the wilderness today and if you could get there in January, would you? How do you like avalanches? And when did you last leave bootprints in wilderness, anyhow? Is it an escape for your feet

or your mind?

Our place is wild but not wilderness, green but not golf, farmed but not food-factory. What I know of the history goes back to 1877 -- the year after Custer's Last Stand -- when someone claimed water rights.

Makes you wonder. How would the valley look if America had been settled from the west coast, not the east? This is an obvious place to build, what with moderate altitude, good soil, and mountains that turn clouds into water. Our farm might have become a decayed inner city by now, or a suburb to which city people fled, then moved on. Do not take this as morbid speculation. It is, on the contrary, a way of feeling good, knowing that we have escaped in time and place.

HEARTH

An animal is a model. Any organism is a model of the world in which it lives.

Richard Dawkins⁶

Huckleberry might qualify as a model of this place. In an emergency, he could catch voles, take bites of snow, and sleep curled up in a drift.

Not me. I would need rod or gun to get my dinner, matches to cook it, and my ripstop nylon windbreaker with a lining of polyester fuzz. I am a naked ape with clothes on. I owe Montana to walls, windows, insulation, and above all to a controlled fire -- oldest of technologies.

At the core of our house is that good-fortune device called a hearth. It is built of boulders smooth as the river could make them and big as two men could carry. There are veins of quartz, tinctures of iron, and shells of fossils. There are lichens that may revive one day, when the boulders roll on toward the sea.

For now, the stones hold a family's warmth and light. A tree's life burns to cheer our lives against the cold. Logs glow, crumble, and rise. Our rings go up in smoke.

1993 is just bark. The fir died then and Tessie was born.

1987 is Huckleberry's annular ring, wide and clear.

1975 is the ring on Anna's finger.

And the flames burn back through years.

Of my entry class in the Foreign Service, only one new officer asked for assignment to Africa. The decision was romantic and foolish -- not a rare combination -- but it got me to the oldest savanna while Bushmen were still there, in a time before country and city. We hunted the same waterbuck, seared its meat in the same embers, and drank from the same river.

That's where I come from, and you too. The Khoi-san tribesmen were better at Africa than me; it was where they had grown up. They could hike in sandals made of old tire-treads, with neither hat nor canteen. They were tougher and sharper of eye, and no wonder. They had more practice. The differences, though, were circumstantial.

The Khoi-san could learn Montana, with me to give them the names. This is my home, after a lifetime of being a stranger. I have learned the snipe's marsh better than the snipe, the trout's stream deeper than the trout. Fowl and fish are better adapted to the habitat, but they don't live long enough to know it like me.

Time happens all at once, outside. Green heads dip and rise in the stream. The mountains are glacial creases, Paleozoic strata, wind-gouged hollows. Low sun catches crystals on fireplace stones that were ten thousand years getting here.

We humans could have stopped rolling somewhere else. We could have settled in Africa, Ireland, Portugal, or Appalachia, but we kept bouncing downstream.

It was luck that got us here. We sneaked on.

≈

JANUARY NOTES

- (1) Riverby. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin. 1894. p.205.
- (2) Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1955. p.642.
- (3) A Sand County Almanac. NY:Oxford, 1996. p.184.
- (4) Natural History magazine, September 1994.
- (5) Nov/Dec 1997, p.6.
- (6) Natural History magazine, 9/95, p.8

ColD
Gunnick

HOME

Datus Proper

The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the World.... I believe in the forest, and in the meadow, and in the night in which the corn grows.

Thoreau, "Walking"

Of thicket we have twenty acres; of meadow more; of corn eight. And then there is the night in which the deer feed -- frequently on our hay. This is Wildness. It was wild in Thoreau's time and it is wild now. He would not like the sounds of progress, but they are as distant from us as the train was from him. He would not like the country fenced off in squares, or the roads, cars, airport, and houses. As to nature, however, he would notice more deer, geese, cranes, ducks, and trout than he saw near Walden Pond. This valley is more fertile than ^{Montana} a piece of New England where I went to school, not far from ^{his} ~~his~~; and it turns out that wildlife responds quickly when ~~you~~ ^{we} give it the habitat it needs.

Wildness, then, is still within reach. You can muddy your boots in it any weekend, if you live in town, or any hour if you live in the country. Wildness is a place to walk, and look, and listen, and spend your life.

To grasp this farm, relax your hand and rest it back-down on your knee. Our house is in the cup of your palm between the lifeline, which is a river, and the trace of a spring-fed tributary. The natural surround is sinuous, all of it -- stream, thicket, and paths made by deer, dogs, or me. I am not sure who is leading whom, but all of us find it easier to skirt the squiggles of marsh and brush.

Don't blame yourself if you get a little turned around in here. Happens to me all the time. For a line you can count on, just get in your car and follow the ^{Gravel} county road, straight as any the Romans built. It does, however, have washboard bumps that might slow you enough to notice our place. Look sharp: A skittish whitetail might jump the barbed wire and wind up in your lap. The house will not leap out at you, though, and the land has no striking features -- no Scotch pines or split-rail fences. The landscape has not been landscaped.

To see where the farm's wealth comes from, look up. The foothills are dirt-gray on their lowest slopes, which are in winter fallow; then yellow, where sun shines on wheat stubble; and tan where pasture takes over. But don't stop there. Let your eye follow a line of dark timber from the top edge of civilization uphill through a canyon, farther up through callused ridges, up to the white peaks with clouds walking on them.

Any day now the winds will shift. Instead of knifing in from the Gulf of Alaska they will waft from Hawaii and some of the drifts will melt on warm afternoons and flow underground or above, trickles becoming waterfall, torrent, river, marsh, and hay field. We put the water to work down here in the valley, but

most of it does not fall here. It's the high country that catches rain and dawn for us, and sunset and snow.

^{du}
The fertility starts with predation in ancient seas. To keep from being eaten, small soft creatures evolved hard exoskeletons, died in their time anyhow, fell to the bottom, were compressed into limestone strata, raised into mountains, and washed down to the valley as calcium carbonates. Every angler knows about limestone spring creeks. It is not just trout that put on weight, though. You cannot find spare ribs to barbecue on this place. The deer may be lean at high altitude, but down here they are layered with hard fat.

Starvation is rare in this habitat, but predation is intense: A conclusion is based on research by Dr. Huckleberry, our resident bird dog. He brings me leftovers -- wings of mallards and teal, in winter, and sometimes of pheasant. Most die at night, when the fox and great horned owl hunt best. Trout get in trouble when the heron has good hunting light. I have not seen a mink tackling the muskrats, but one big muskrat was carrying off a dead young one, probably for dinner. This is getting ahead of the story to make a point about the seething fertility of young wetland.

Seawater is a
The glacial lake ~~is~~ called an aquifer, ~~now that~~ it has been buried, but it remains where it has always been, at a constant temperature of 50° Fahrenheit (10° Celsius). We use it for the heat pump, and of course for drinking, then return the water, and test to be sure that the well remains pure. So far it has.

We have also liberated a half-acre of the aquifer. Just south of the house, we dug to a depth of some twenty feet,

removing rubble deposited during the last few ticks of the clock. The result is a piece of Gallatin Lake -- a name bigger than our pond, but geologically accurate. Rainbow trout now swim where the detritus of mountains used to be. Sometimes they even spawn successfully, though there is no current to get them in the mood.

As stage, Gallatin Lake is fully booked. Look out any dawn when the water is ice-free -- beginning with the vernal equinox, roughly -- and you see ducks coasting in, rainbows ascendant, or perhaps a muskrat cutting lines on the calm surface, for lack of something better to do. Muskrats have no imagination, but they eat well in fertile mudland and work off their energy doodling.

As fishery, the pond would have brought blessed relief in, say, the suburbs of an eastern city where we lived for a while. Out here, still water is very slow stuff, by comparison to the stream yards away.

In the time before fences, when this was not a place at all, the stream wrote its story in braille. Your boots read the oldest channels, which are now dry, grassy swales. Cattails line bends where the current flowed recently, as Captain William Clark passed through, and there you may sink to your ankles in marsh. But it is a natural marsh. In the main creek you need hip boots, even for the shallow sunny riffles where water runs over gravel. And for the pools, use chest waders. You may find yourself in deep silt -- civilization's deposit.

When a writer calls a land young, he usually means that people have not had time to make a mess of it. This place has been irrevocably changed by Americans of European extraction, though it is adolescent in geologic time.

These children have caught their first trout in the stream.

The beginnings of the world development toward higher, literate, and monumental civilizations are now generally recognized as having had as their seeding ground the fertile mudlands of the lower Tigris-Euphrates valleys.

Joseph Campbell¹

repeat
This fertile mudland is an escape, for us -- not from civilization but from cities that are exceeding critical mass. A town nearby would suit Anna, but the town is becoming a city, and its growth is producing wealth, and one year those who have got their share will be pouring over maps, wondering where to move for a fresh start.

It's not the facts that worry me. It's the trend. The old part of town is beautiful but the new part is interchangeable with suburbs anywhere in America. Latest monument is a retail store with more shelf-space than the whole of Main Street, when I was growing up. The new giant is a box with little false peaks on the roof here and there, added to mollify zoning codes. The effect was intended to be alpine.

Each wild place, on the contrary, is particular. You must look for its nature, and in so doing find your own.

At the end of the last ice age, glaciers melted and filled the valley, creating Gallatin Lake. Streams then flowed into the lake for ten thousand years, filling it with rubble, and vegetation built dark, silty loam three or four feet deep where our house now stands.

(1) NY: Harper & Row, 1988. Historical Atlas of World Mythology, Vol. I, Part I. p. 10.

Makes you wonder. How would our valley look if America had been settled from the west coast, not the east? This is an obvious place to build, what with moderate altitude, good soil, and mountains that turn clouds into water. Our farm might have become a decayed inner city by now, or a suburb to which city people fled, then moved on. Do not take this as morbid speculation. It is, on the contrary, a way of feeling good, knowing that we have escaped in time and place. Future generations will have no such luck.

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