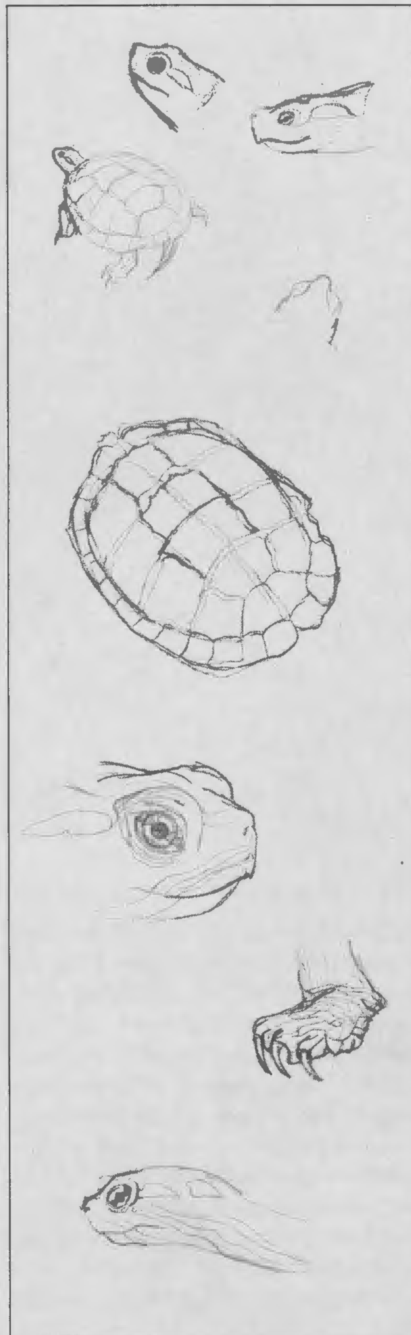
A Forest Quest: Learning to See

When I walk in the woods it's plain that I am looking for something. The way I turn over ferns and scan hieroglyphics on birch bark gives me away. I peer ahead as if carrying a torch on a dark night, and feel the forest behind me zip shut, close ranks, swallow into obscurity the detail I've missed, even as a woodpecker's glimmer beckons me on. Hearing the trees whisper, I suspect they come closer to revealing what I'm looking for once I'm safely past. So I try to surprise them. At times, I spin to catch them off-guard, but they are too quick for me, and stand mute and poker-faced.

In the woods it is never more true that what you see is what you get. Some days I see small drops of fungus that look and feel like orange jellybeans. I see a nuthatch playing peekaboo, and step over the sweet, spongy guts of a dead tree. Then I return contented, for if I keep hoarding these bits and scraps of vision, perhaps one day I'll see how to quilt them together.

But I battle familiarity. We've all seen trees before, and galls on leaves, and ants, and lichens, and towhees. I've walked this path so many times that repetition ought to blind me. The poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, knew a lot about seeing. He went to a zoo and stared at a single panther for days. Then he wrote a poem that began, "From seeing and seeing the seeing has become so exhausted/it no longer sees anything anymore."



Drawings from the field sketchbook of Michael DiGiorgio

So I bring aids into the woods, crutches, tools. Which tool I brandish on a particular day will bias what I see. If I'm in a scientific mood, it may be a botanical key or a bird field guide. If the day is more suited for poetry, I bring a notebook and some Robert Frost. Other days it may be a camera; still others, a rock hammer. And other days, I'll try anything; in a fit of dilettantism I'll haul them all along, Gray's *Flora* and Rexroth's *Collected Shorter Poems* uncomfortably nuzzling each other's covers.

As there is more to listening than hearing, there is more to seeing than sight. I learned this as a child on Saturday bird walks with the local Audubon Society. Patient adults would describe the whereabouts of a cerulean warbler with directions more elaborate than a celestial fix. Often, it was no use. I would put up my binoculars, I would squint and search, and the bird would fly from the exact spot I had been watching. There's more to this seeing stuff than meets the eye.

The ethics of birders who "list" may not be inscribed in stone, but they are followed more rigorously than some commandments which are. Most listers will only count a bird if they have glimpsed enough field marks to be able to identify it themselves. A shadow vanishing into leaves, a quick burst of color that other more fortunate birders assure them was indeed a coppery-tailed trogon is not enough. Until they are capable of naming it on

their own, it has not been seen.

Finding a species we recognize by name in a forest is similar to finding a friend's face in a crowd: in both cases we feel suddenly at home. The challenge of naming adds zest to our expeditions, for we are playing a game. We may look for whisker stripes, take spore prints, scavenge for pine cones, and, in our snooping, see things we'd never have known to look for, otherwise.

Naming also means power, for once we know a thing's name we can draw on a wealth of accumulated knowledge about it. A rose by any other name might smell as sweet, but once we've pegged the meadow rose, *Rosa blanda,* we can pry into its anatomy, family background, and reproductive habits. We can discover that grouse, opossum, and bear feed on its fruits, that Indians ate them raw, and that we can harvest them for jellies high in vitamin C. In short, we know its caste in a grand scientific hierarchy and are comfortably sure of where we stand.

Our ability to see is tractable; it can be practiced and honed like any skill. We can learn to twirl a fine focus knob we didn't even know we had to selectively reveal what we want. If you don't believe this, take a walk through a familiar woods with a specialist of your choice: a mycologist, perhaps, or an expert on caterpillars.

I had a professor of geology who could see entire landscapes of the past in a plain yellow cliff by the sea. He would point out where a stream had run, where it had flooded, where the ocean had created a beach. Thinking he was hallucinating, we nonetheless strained to see the waves and freshets in his mind, jotting notes and sketches frantically. When at last we, too, began to see breakers licking the shore, we stopped staring at notebooks.

After taking this wonderful course, I could see the viscid upwellings of plutons and the ponderous scourings of glaciers. I could see the earth heave in an unsteady breathing, rising and falling, hiccupping occasionally through an earthquake, sneezing out a volcano. Before the class, I had never seen an alluvial fan. On my next trip to the desert I found the world not only possessed alluvial fans, it was littered with them. They were stuffed in every crack of mountain I could see.

Yet, as some geologists illustrate, the specialist can lose sight of the whole. In focusing on any one set of details there is danger of the rest fading into an uninteresting blur. To someone intent on deducing geomorphology, wildflowers on the rocks can be disregarded as so many weeds. From there it is not a large step to see forests as an inconvenient overburden to the coal underneath, or the molybdenum yet to be dug in an alpine wilderness. I don't mean to pick on geologists. Frog-lovers can overlook lily pads, and birders can ignore anything unfeathered.

Drawings from the field sketchbook of Gordon Morrison

If too much emphasis is placed on names, birders can even come to ignore birds. Once, while I watched a flock of mallards through a spotting scope, two passing birders asked what I was seeing. "Just mallards?" they remarked, clearly puzzled, and moved on. They literally could no longer see plump bodies shimmering in late-afternoon sun. All they saw was a label: mallard, *Anas platyrhynchos,* the most ordinary duck in the world.

Names can, at times, seem utterly irrelevant; one senses, after all, that Tennyson would not have cared what species his "flower in the crannied wall" belonged to. If we let it, a particular blossom can take on a significance other than the species it represents. It can delight us with its beauty or inspire us, as it did Tennyson, to think of a spiritual connection between the flower and ourselves. Classification can strip away individuality, and it is the individuality of living things that keeps us from growing jaded in the natural world. Highway signs and Pepsi cans are tediously identical wherever we go, but no mallard or acorn or daddy-long-legs is quite like the next.

"Walking among all these flowers, I cannot *see* enough. One is aware of the abundance of lovely things—forms, scents, colors—lavished on the earth beyond any human capacity to perceive or number or imitate," writes Wendell Berry. Much of what draws us to the woods, season after season, is a realization that, even if we spent a lifetime trying, we could not pigeonhole the life there. We sense a magic and mystery worth returning to; that more is afoot than our field guides can ever reveal.

Some disaffected observers have tried to dispense with naming altogether, suspecting that labels can become excuses for, rather than keys to, understanding. "What am I doing saying 'foxtail pine'?" writes Gary Snyder in a poem by that name. They wish to avoid what they consider the restraints of objectivity and receive pure, undiluted impres-

sions. In *Desert Solitaire* Edward Abbey declares, "I want to be able to look at and into a juniper tree, a piece of quartz, a vulture, a spider, and see it as it is in itself, devoid of all humanly ascribed qualities, anti-Kantian, even the categories of scientific description."

Such seeing can be immediate and powerful, creating a sense of empathy with living things that contrasts with a scientist's detachment. It can also be extremely difficult. We are no longer striding over the earth so omnipotently, confident of our place in an ordered scheme. Humbled, we can grow dizzy at the profusion and intricacy of what we see, scarcely able to remember our own names anymore. Annie Dillard speaks of venturing so that "my own shutter opens, and the moment's light prints on my own silver gut." But she also admits, "I can't go out and try to see this way. I'll fail, I'll go mad."

We want to project an order on what we see so that we can comprehend it; we also want to simply relax and accept whatever intimations come our way. This internal conflict in seeing corresponds to a long-standing ambivalence in how our society views nature. But a trend in the twentieth century may have catalyzed the beginnings of a resolution. The woods began to disappear.

Not only woods, but beaches, prairies, marshes, and tundra all began to vanish with disconcerting speed. Some clear-sighted individuals protested that categorization had gotten out of hand. We were seeing neither forests nor trees, they said, only dollar tags plastered over "timber resources," but their arguments for preserving the beauty of forests and other wild places were often brushed aside as emotional and unscientific. So they pointed out that forests prevent soil erosion on hillsides. They noted that marshes are breeding areas for fish and that lakes supply fresh water to humans. They began, that is, to fight back in the language of science—the then-fledgling science of ecology.

In so doing, they transformed what had begun as an obscure branch of field botany into a science that begot a new way of looking at the world. Ecology is less a subject matter than a point of view. It incorporates botany, zoology, geology and other disciplines, but concentrates on what natural systems do rather than what they are. In exploring the now-familiar concepts of food webs, energy flow, and nutrient cycles, ecologists such as Aldo Leopold pioneered what he called

the scientific "detection of harmony" in the land, which before, he said, had been "the domain of poets."

The walk in the woods would never be the same again. A few poets and philosophers had always maintained that humans lived within a harmonious natural order. But when ecologists began saying the same thing, many who had disregarded more intangible arguments paid attention. Preservationists could now call upon scientific evidence to strengthen their positions. The great wilderness defender Sigurd Olson praised ecology for tapping "the source of man's original sense of oneness with all creation" while being "a perspective reinforced with logic and reason, cause and effect, and scientific method."

In a sense, ecology forced the two ways of seeing together. I can hold a salamander in my hand and know not just through intuition, but through science as well, that we are both parts of a larger whole. Martin Buber once said, "There is nothing that I must not see in order to see, and there is no knowledge that I must forget." Similarly, it was not necessary to abandon our old view of Linnaean hierarchical orders heaped like building blocks—only animate it. And we could no longer scoff at poetic insights describing a mysterious flow and unity in nature. Ecological reformers termed this blending of perspectives "a new vision," and preached it in hopes of changing the way we treat the earth.

A new vision. It's tempting to declare, rather pretentiously, that this is what I'm looking for when I walk in the woods—some Rosetta Stone translating for society the messages I find on birch bark, some ineffably inspiring synergism of science and poetry, rationality and emotion, mind and heart, and so forth.

Maybe. It would be nice to think so. But I suspect my motivations for inspecting turret spider castles and following deer tracks are less grandiose. Before I can bray about some unity of vision that all of society must cultivate, I need to discern it more clearly myself. I need to keep looking so that, as Woodsworth said, "While with an eye made quiet by the power/Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,/We see into the life of things."

Gale Warner

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