

A Walk in my Home Place

Follow the river upstream. Across the exposed bedrock –gneiss and mica schist. Climb up the gentle slippery slope of the tiny batholith to the moss and lichen gardens in the open veins of the rock. To where the moose cow and calf spent one night three winters ago.

And move on to where the beavers cut the sticky pines & dragged them down to their sticky lodge by the shore. Mouths full of pine gum.

Upstream the silty shore slopes easily into the buttonbush, sweet gale and dogwoods. Shrubby lacework edging the river's shore below the white pines and oaks.

Turning inland at the colony of fringed polygala I come to where the paper birch used to be before the beavers harvested all the branches and I salvaged all the trunks towed behind the canoe to become winter fires.

Steeply past the oak sculpted by the pileated woodpeckers. A natural art piece rising from a graying bed of sculpted chips. Not waste. Step one on the journey of nutrient molecules into the flow to new oak sprouts. Without the flow from decomposition, the flow of juvenile nutrients from bedrock would be too slow. So would the flow from oaks into acorns. So would the growth of sprouting acorns.

The slope is steep and angled and the footing unsure. The landscape of riverside marshes laid out below refreshes senses above the feet.

Next springtime all the little lagoons in those riverine marshes will become frog factories. But the bitterns and the herons will see them as snack bars.

On top of the ridge I hit the "middle trail" and head farther upstream just below the very crest of the ridge under white pines with massive trunks that force my gaze upward. A few have fallen from old age or under attack by fierce winds.

Healthy neighbour trees tried to catch one giant on the way down. The fallen matriarch snapped but still could not find rest on the ground. So it became a stilled escalator for grouse and turkeys going to roost. Underneath is no place to linger.

A sudden snort and careless crashing tell of a disturbed sleeping doe and fawn as they charge off upstream along the trail. Healed bark skinned on a blue beech sapling marks the fawn's male parentage.

Following the deer down a cut through the lower ridge puts me in a seasonally flooded basin. Connected by high water to the river in spring but dry enough for slippers now.

Turning north sees me scrabbling on a slope steep enough for cardiac testing. My hiking poles bite in and my arms help me climb. Up to the "high trail". The winter ski trail along the very crest of the high ridge.

Heading away from the setting sun, the ski trail tunnels through the tree canopy. Sky-high vistas reach from under marvelous white pines, matriarchal sugar maples and fast-grown ashes.

Red oak tops still bear the marks of the highest density of gypsy moth infestation in Ontario. Recovery has taken since the 70's and 80's. Some have struggled back, some have lost their tops and some remain only as skeletal snags in the canopy and clearings. Ashes and blue beech have filled many of the gaps.

Openings left in the canopy from the gypsy moths have encouraged white pine seedlings, rather like the effects of fire. Pines arrayed from tiny seedlings to polewood size, search with their roots for nutrients from the Precambrian granite and from the decomposers,

Among the white pines are many with branches all the way down to eye level. They grew in openings without crowding neighbours to force them upward. Pasture pines. This entire peninsula was unimproved grazing land until 1970. The remarkably beautiful forest that I now enjoy has restored itself in about 44 years.

The entire surrounding township was clear-cut in the late 1800's. A political contribution to the fortunes of a lumber baron. In paintings from 1932, the hills north of Kennebec (then Cross) Lake were shown bald. Grass without trees. Now fully reforested by natural processes.

It is autumn and scattered across the forest floor little raised domes of fallen leaves hide this year's mushrooms. Fungus growing up out of the soil to produce and distribute spores. Spore immigrants for new fungal colonies. Real fungal work is done under the litter. The decomposer factory is the underground mat of interconnected, hair-like cells, spread over huge areas. Wrapping and connecting into roots, the fungal web feeds the trees and many other plants.

My home place is filled with never-ending wonders and uncountable questions. Enough for my lifetime and more.