

*A Day Began With Fishing*

I am fishing in a stream. Fly-fishing to be exact and I do not even like fishing. It is a beautiful warm summer day. The sun is shining and the sky is bright with just a few puffy white clouds. My imagination is inspired by shape-shifting atmospheric figures. Surrounding the river—and my clumsy attempts to wield the fishing pole—is a dense forest with trees growing up to the waters edge.

It is quite odd; I have never really been fishing or even enjoyed it at all. I could not successfully fly fish if a puppeteer forced me by marionette. Yet here I am, completely decked out in fishing gear: waders, fly jacket, floppy hat, hook, line, and sinker. I look around and briefly wish I did know how to fish. The river is crammed with the rambunctious jumping animals. I spot several different kinds, all full-grown over a foot in length. There are silver salmon with ruby red bellies that swim beside brown and black spotted walleye that in turn flap fins next to dark green trout. I realize suddenly that this specific river at this specific spot is untouched by human hands—that is why it is teeming with so many species of fish. I'll bet Nick Adams felt just like this while fishing, when he was catching completely wild fish most likely spawned in this stream. The pleasing, winding riverbanks are much more appealing than the smooth concrete rectangles found at the Oden State Fish Hatchery and the biodiversity is intrinsically favorable to the homogenous rainbow trout. This much is obvious even for a novice fisherman such as myself.

Being completely unable to make any use of the fly fishing pole, I splash to the side of the river and ditch my fishing attire. I don my hiking boots and begin to

explore upstream, breathing in my surroundings. The sun is warm on my skin and the air cool, tickling my body with a slight breeze. Everything smells fresh and untainted; it smells so *green*. Walking along the unnamed river I am constantly filled with awe at the many forms of life before my eyes. There are poofs of black flies and mosquitoes twisting and whirling in the air while fish, frogs, and birds all dive through them competing for the tastiest morsels. Cranes and ducks swim through the reeds under the shade of grasping branches reaching out over the water. There is such abundance. It makes me feel insignificant and I love it. Nature provides such a wealth of resources tied up in this impossibly complex web of energy; I am completely ignored by the surrounding energy. I exist as just one more thing, tied into the web and inseparable from every other life form taking advantage of this pristine environment.

I continue to follow the river upstream. I am content to continue my hike and enjoy the day. I lose track of time meandering by the river, using these carefree moments mimicking the animal's calls and spying for novel species, until I realize that the river is getting narrower. Much sooner than expected, the river has transformed from a wide swift flow of water into a gentle stream. It continues to diminish until it is little more than a trickle over some rocks. At the source of the river are three natural springs giving forth the lifeblood of the planet. Like a mother providing milk for her young, these three springs of water bubbling up directly from the ground are the sources of all the diversity I had smiled at downriver.

This oasis in the trees gives me pause for consideration. I suddenly vividly remember from school all the information on the inner workings of the Earth's hydrosphere and how vital it is to life on this planet. The boring school lectures in impersonal auditoriums come alive in the wilderness. The force of the water being expelled indicates that this is an artesian well. This water originated from miles away, collecting in the drainage basin and absorbed into the ground water. From hundreds of directions the water accumulates in the underground aquifer, flowing beneath my feet through invisible pathways and caves, earthen arteries. When the water reaches an impermeable layer of clay or limestone the flow stops but the pressure continues to build behind it. Millions of gallons of water saturate the soil and exert tremendous pressure on the underground water supply, probing for any cracks or opening in the earth above for the pressure to just be released. When the surface of the ground is below the water table, springs such as these are formed. It may be solipsism but it is easy to imagine this well, in this forest, on this clear summer day was put here for my personal enjoyment as a gift from nature.

I step into the water and it's ice cold temperature quickly breaks me from my repose and back to the present. A million tiny pinpricks pleasantly sting my exposed flesh while goose bumps dance over my body. I drink my fill from the crystal clear water freshly filtered through the ground; then I drink my fill again. There could not be more perfect surroundings to stop and have lunch. I pull a PB&J out of my front right cargo pocket, and close my eyes. The gooey Bio Station Lunch Special dissolves in my mouth as I listen to the sounds all around me. I try to tune in and analyze each sound. There is the bubbling brook still stinging my legs, the wind

singing to the leaves, and a dozen or more different birds also singing, bringing both fear and love to their enemies, friends and me. After cycling through the sounds I realize that there is one sound conspicuously missing: the man-made machines. Even while I'm studying at the University of Michigan Biological Station, as far north as possible while staying in the Lower Peninsula, I can still hear the highway and its speeding cars day or night. Airplanes can be seen flying noisily overhead too. But here it is all natural, and it is slightly disconcerting. I must have traveled further away from camp than I thought.

With my sandwich finished, I randomly pick a direction and take off into the surrounding woods. Without going more than a few yards I immediately know that I am in primary forest: old growth un-logged pristine woods. What luck! I've stumbled into the inside of an ecological treasure! It is easy to tell the difference between this ancient landscape and the woods I grew up with. The trees are spaced widely apart, full grown and in control of the land. The massive white and red pines tower in the air 250 feet or more, older than the United States Constitution. Their branches create a canopy that blots out the sun. Millions of years of evolution have turned the great pines into experts at nutrient extraction. Water, phosphorous and nitrogen are force-drawn from the surrounding dirt and rerouted upwards. To the enjoyment of contemporary environmentalists, the leaves draw in carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and convert it to biomass, thereby storing the greenhouse gas in a more benign terrestrial reservoir. The trunks grow nearly vertical straining for the final vital ingredient, sunlight, which finishes their nutritious diet.

Down on the forest floor the air is cool under the shade. There is absolutely no yellow sunlight reaching the ground and there are no bracken ferns or bushes impeding my path; the going is easy. I walk along for a few hours drinking it all in. Unlike Hartwick Pines, there is no pathway, no power lines, and no helpful signs pointing you in the “right” direction. In fact, there is no sign of humans ever having contacted this place. The only breaks in the forest are from fallen trees, one of which I pause at to catch my breath. This clearing was created by the inevitable collapse of a giant. I know that these disturbed patches of woods are essential to the health of the forest; they provide an intermediate level of distress that promotes competition and biodiversity. With an epic crash of trunk, branch, and a mountain of green, the oligarchic rule of the pine is diminished in this one small area of land. The forest floor is suddenly exposed to a flood of sunlight allowing young new life to flourish in the sacrifice of the old.

With my head and neck craned upwards taking in the magnificence of the one blue cloud in the green sky, I hear the wolves before I see them. Growling, barking and yipping quicken my heartbeat as I peer through the trees searching for the source of the sound, and there! About fifty yards away I spot the elusive wolf pack. This must be newest pack of gray wolves to cross into the Lower Peninsula; it is the first pack of breeding wolves this far south in over a century. As I stealthily inch closer for a better look, taking extreme care not to alert these dominant apex predators to my presence, the picture of curiosity killing the cat with a vicious snap of the jaws flashes through my brain. However I squash the thought as quickly as it appeared. I would never again have such opportunity to witness a wild pack of

wolves; my enthusiasm for such a sight outweighs my fear. I creep closer as cautiously as possible until I find the perfect vantage point near the end of my fallen tree. When I finally get a clear view of the spectacle before me, I was immensely grateful for my earlier caution.

In front of me were eight wolves in the process of devouring the remains of what looked to be a giant moose. The remains sliced open on the ground were too big to be a deer; it could only be a moose or elk, but I did not think they still roamed the Lower Peninsula? Luckily for me the wolves are too absorbed in their recent conquest to notice my slight intrusion. I was so engrossed in the carnage at first that I didn't even remember what I had learned about these wolves at the Bio Station. It was only supposed to be four wolves that made up the breeding pack that the mammal's class had been tracking, not eight. But here they were nonetheless: a large pair of wolves that obviously made the breeding duo, a smaller scraggily pair, and four adolescent pups. Dark crimson blood was covering the dirt and grass and the smell of iron tinged the air.

My mouth hangs down as I openly gape at these beautiful creatures. The fur on their heads and snout were stained with blood, but the un-reddened fur is shades of black to grey to white. The hair was shorter than what I recalled from pictures; they had shed the thick winter fur to better endure the summer heat. Almost as if these militarized war dogs had gotten a buzz cut. The gray wolf is the largest canine on the planet. I alpha male is easy to distinguish. The king of the pack, he rules by virtue of being the biggest, baddest bruiser of the bunch. Gray wolves can reach a

length of five feet from nose to tail and two and a half feet tall while weighing over 100 pounds, but this pack leader looks even bigger than that. He ferociously tears off the choice chunks of the juiciest meat. I watch as his powerful jaws rib and tear at the exposed flesh, biting down with 1,500 pounds of force— strong enough to snap a deer spine in half or dent steel. The smaller pair and the wolf pups have to be content with waiting their turn and I could tell they were getting anxious. They were running around the carcass, nipping and snapping in excitement for the upcoming meal. I watch wordlessly as one of the smaller adult wolves gets too close for the alpha male's tolerance. He jumps the weaker canine, claws out and jaws ripping fur until he wrestled the trespasser to the ground and held him by the neck. When the alpha male released him, the young wolf backed off whimpering and submissive. Secure in his dominance, the alpha male stops and stares directly at me. I see his sharp emerald green eyes reflecting off of mine. As if by instinct, I know his gaze is a challenge, daring me to contest his supremacy; a bolt of fear surges through my body. Those green eyes, coupled with snarling and bearing of his teeth, snap me out of my awe-struck trance. Following their leader, the other wolves in the pack turn to me and growl, the fur on the back of their neck bristling as they lower their heads aggressively. I had stayed far past my welcome and it was time to leave. I backed away slowly, preying they wouldn't follow.

They must have resumed their meal because the wolves did not maul me. Now out of sight of the wolf-buffet, I was beginning to worry about what was going on. The wolves had snapped me out of my fun-filled day. With all of the beauty and tranquility of the forest, I forgot that everyday is a brutal struggle between life and

death for most of these animals. I walked back through the woods, surrounded by the harsh wilderness that had seemed so kind just moments before. With my aimless meandering and internal musing I did not notice the approach of a fat, dark raincloud that quickly cancelled what little sunlight there was. Where the hell am I? I'm getting scared. Before I can panic too much there is a loud SPLURT on my shoulder. I raise my hand to wipe it off and it comes away warm and white. I look up into the trees to find the offending creature and am rewarded with another SPLAT right on my face. I quickly close my mouth but it still drips into my ears. What I had thought was a rain cloud is actually a giant throng of birds coming right at me.

A swarm made up of hundreds of thousands of birds flies through the forest air. The flapping of so many wings coupled with their squawking is as loud as a jet engine, drowning my thoughts. I stand there dumbfounded and amazed yet again, staring at the incredible flock. They invade the forest; they are pooping on, eating or squawking at anything that gets in the way. Spider and grasshopper beware this air armada. Awareness dawns on my consciousness as the birds fly closer and I get a better look. I recognize their distinct plumage from the Petoskey Historical Society Museum. Their feathers are dark blue on the top of their heads and their back. Their wings and tail feather are dark black and their breast and neck is rust colored orange. Impossibly, yet undeniably, the wave of feathers flying above me is actually a screeching mass of passenger pigeons.

The shock of this thought spurs me into action. I begin to run. I don't know where I'm going but I can't stay here. I'm getting pelted with their black and white



feces and the smell is nauseating. My running only seems to startle the birds more. I sprint through the woods as birds slam into my chest. I flail my arms trying to bat the birds away, probably breaking their fragile necks. The sight and smell of more birds flying through the air than there are trees in the forest is overwhelming. I panic more and more as I run. I tell myself not to die that Alfred Hitchcock death, squashed flat under the weight of a thousand pecking beaks and batting wings. Careening through the trees I suddenly see a path and aim down it. Finally, humans, civilization, safety! The path is vague, barely discernible on the forest floor, but now I'm desperate to be out of these woods. I run and I sprint and I jog until I can neither see nor here any of the catty birds. The trees thin out at the end of the trail. I walk out of the gloomy understory and stop dumbfounded once again. I'm staring at what can only be classified as a Native American hunting party.

I have not seen many traditional Native Americans in my life, but this group is unmistakable. What look to be deer skin vests and pants cover their dark skin. They appear eight feet tall, bristling with muscles. Each of them carries a bow and quiver full of arrows as well as a sharp looking dagger on their hips. I don't know if I am more surprised to see them or they surprised to see me but they definitely don't look happy. We stand there in stalemate staring at each other; me, panting and out of breath, covered in white and black bird shit with scratches crisscrossing my arms and legs from my reckless dash through the woods on one side, and over a dozen full grown Native Americans on the other side. Before any of us could think of something to say, an annoying rushing ring from my pants pocket breaks the silence. *BRIIIIIIIING-BRIIIIIIIING BRIIIIIIIING-BRIIIIIIIING!* It is my cell phone, my

connection to modernity! It must be friends or family calling me, wondering where I am and ready to come save me.

*BRIIIIIIIING-BRIIIIIIIING BRIIIIIIIING-BRIIIIIIIING!* I pull the phone out of my pocket but drop it in my panic. The Native Americans are surprised shiny black object that I fling around. They start to wave their arms, pointing at me and yelling in a guttural tongue. Some pull out those sharp daggers made from dull Keweena copper eyeing me and my mysterious technology with unconcealed aggression. I desperately try to answer my phone but the screen is frozen! For the second time in less than an hour I tell myself that I don't want to die. I don't want to add myself to the rank of extinct species, extinct ecosystems and extinct cultures that make up this implausible land.

*BRIIIIIIIING-BRIIIIIIIING BRIIIIIIIING-BRIIIIIIIING!* I try smashing my phone but it won't break on the soft dirt. One of the Native Americans pulls out his bow, notches it with an arrow and points it directly at me as my phone continues its incessant blaring. Before I could voice a protest, let alone try to dodge, he releases the bow. I watch in slow motion as the arrow flies straight for my chest like some evil bird built to kill me. I want to scream, to cry, to see my mom just one more time but I can't. Time slows as adrenaline surges through my system and the arrow flies closer. I want to be away from this terrible place, back in the comfort of my home watching TV; away from nature and from death, but I can't. I can only watch, awe-filled, as the arrow flies closer bringing death along with it. The beauty of today is now pure terror. This cannot be possible. It cannot be real! But the arrow is close

to me now. It shatters the front of my outstretched cell phone screen, enters through the skin of my chest and heads for my heart.