

Presque Isle Winter

A gentle afternoon snow is falling as I stand before the large glass windows, looking out over the balcony at the frozen Lake Huron cove. It's February, and I've come here to my grandparents' house in the forests of Presque Isle in northern Michigan for a weekend away from school. Everyone else is downstairs, leaving me alone in the large room on the second floor. Ever since I was eight my family and I have visited here at least twice each year, in winter and in summer. Whatever the season, whatever the weather, alone or with my cousins, there has always been something to do here, even if it's simply staring out at the scenery like I'm doing now.

Much of the view past the windows is taken up by Lake Huron. In summer one can see vessels of all sizes go by, from fishing boats who ply the waters for salmon and lake trout to massive freighters that haul limestone from the nearby quarry, but right now the lake is deserted and will likely be so for some time. What was a huge blue sea of a lake in summer is now a wind-swept sheet of ice that piles up into numerous peaks. Past the edge of the ice sheet the open water looks angry, gray waves rolling in to crash against the ice in towers of spray.

The lake hasn't always frozen like this in winter. Although I have memories of early visits to Presque Isle when the ice stretched almost to the horizon line, in many recent years the ice has been much less or, in some years, completely nonexistent. I'm glad that this winter has a lot of ice; the lake looks beautiful when frozen, and the ice caps will be fun to explore when the snow stops. The ice may also help increase the lake level, which has been in a slow decline for many years.

At the edge of Lake Huron a blanket of snow covers the rocky shoreline where my family and I search for fossils and launch kayaks in summer. There isn't as much snow as there's been

in some previous years, when you could climb on top of a snow drift and dig straight down to make a fort, but the amount that's there should be deep enough to ski or snowshoe in the woods, maybe even deep enough to allow sledding. A fifteen-minute drive from the house leads to a huge hill, and during winters with enough snow it provides some of the best sledding I've had. One year long ago the snow piled up into a ramp at the bottom of the hill, and with a teenage sense of invincibility my cousins, my brother, and I took turns shooting over it in a sled. The ramp never re-formed after that winter, but I still have pictures of me flying off the ramp at high speed at least three feet above the ground.

Behind the house and down the shoreline in both directions stretches the forest, a vast green wall of cedars. When my grandparents bought this ten-acre plot in 1989 they named it "Cedar Cove" after these abundant trees. The tree is hardy enough to grow on the rocks and pebbles that cover the ground, and as an "evergreen" it retains its foliage even in the dead of winter.

A crow flies over the treetops in the distance, a black shadow against the gray sky. I follow its flight, making sure that it isn't actually a bald eagle, when sudden movement closer to the house catches my eye. A flock of snow buntings has come to feed on the birdseed my grandparents set for them this morning beneath the cedar tree that stands directly in front of the house. The little birds descend en masse, several dozen living snowflakes with brown backs and black wingtips. In the summer they breed above the Arctic Circle, where the male assumes a striking black and white plumage. I've never seen this plumage, only pictures of it; in winter the males grow duller, more like the females, and they all fly south. Every winter this flock migrates to Cedar Cove, where they find my grandparents' birdseed waiting for them.

The buntings gather on the ground beneath the tree, pecking with their short thick bills. When they're not on the ground they often sit on the roof of the house, but they almost never perch in trees, which are unfamiliar to them in their Arctic breeding grounds. Their visits to the birdseed are usually short, and this one is no exception: some movement downstairs startles them, and the whole flock lifts off and flies out to the ice on the lake, shrinking white specks that are soon lost to sight.

Wildlife is abundant here, and more animals are observed in the winter than in the summer due to the birdseed that lures them from their hiding places. With the buntings gone a trio of red squirrels takes their place, searching the ground with their round black eyes. When one finds a seed it stands up on its hind legs, its white belly contrasting with its red fur as it eats the food gripped in its forepaws. A downy woodpecker perches on a cage filled with suet, chiseling at the food with hammer blows from its sharp bill. Several mourning doves gather on the ground beneath the tree, heads bobbing up and down as they walk from seed to seed.

Watching the familiar animals at the feeder, I think of some of the more unusual visitors I've seen. Some years an opossum visits, looking like a big gray rat with a white face and hairless tail. One winter when my cousins visited, their golden retriever, Khaki, cornered the opossum and shook it in her mouth before anyone could stop her. We all thought that the opossum was dead, but a few minutes later it stood up and walked away with no outward sign of injury. Deer often visit in the early evening, including a handsome buck. They seem to know when people are watching them, and if there's a sudden movement they bound away with their white tails held high. On some years a flock of turkeys has visited, a large group of huge dark birds with bald heads that run in, clear out all the seed on the ground in minutes, and fly away as quickly as they came. Raccoons occasionally come to the feeders at night, and one winter there

was even a gray fox that timidly nibbled at seed while everyone in the house admired its smooth fur coat and delicate canine features.

Other wildlife is sometimes observed crossing the lake ice in front of the house. Many years ago a river otter was seen several days in a row, its long, thin form walking on the ice with a loping gait and diving through holes into the water. It was seen so often that an “otter watch” was established in which my cousins and I took turns looking for it. On a more recent trip I saw a mink on the ice, which looked similar to the otter but much smaller. After it disappeared from view I went outside on the ice with my brother and a few of my cousins to search for it, and we found it hiding beneath an ice shelf and got a close look at its dark body and white chin.

On rare occasion coyotes have been seen walking on the ice. Although physically similar to a domestic dog, perhaps a light-colored German Shepherd, the coyote identifies itself as a wild animal by how it acts. While dogs like Khaki run around and have fun, the coyote moves with much more caution and purpose as it looks for prey and watches for threats. On one memorable morning a few years ago a coyote was seen digging at the snow on the frozen lake and ended up dragging a hidden deer carcass out of its icy tomb. After the coyote had eaten its fill and left, other scavengers visited the deer throughout the rest of the day including crows, ravens, and an eagle. Eventually the temperature warmed, the ice around the deer melted, and what was left of the body disappeared into the waters of the lake.

In the summer Lake Huron turns from a field of ice into a seemingly endless body of open water, and my grandparents get their boat out of their barn for some water recreation. They love to go salmon fishing, and when my family and I visit they often take us with them. Salmon fishing is an exercise in patience as the boat drives slowly across the lake with baited lines

trailing into the water, everyone staring at them looking for signs of a fish strike. The first time my brother and I were taken salmon fishing my grandparents reeled in a large lake trout, a big silver fish that thrashed wildly as it was pulled from the water in a net. It may not have been a salmon, but it was still an impressive fish and a good catch. When it was cleaned at the house Grandpa opened its stomach and found it full of alewives. There didn't appear to be room for anything else in there, but the trout had still gone after the lure. In later years my brother and I were allowed to try to reel fish in ourselves, although to this day the only fish I've successfully caught while salmon fishing has been a single lake trout.

Unfortunately the salmon fishing in summer has been decimated by the dramatic decline of the alewives that salmon eat, caused by the actions of invasive species such as gobies and zebra mussels. Ironically, the alewife itself is an invasive species, and the salmon was introduced partially to control its numbers. Lake trout, a native species, aren't dependant on alewives and can find other food, but the salmon stock has plummeted, and in recent summers my grandparents have caught barely any fish.

The boat gets other uses besides fishing. There's a spot on the shore north of the Old Presque Isle Lighthouse with several large sand dunes, and the boat is used to take us there so we can climb and explore the great hills of sand. There's also an old shipwreck in a shallow cove that can be seen from the boat on sunny days. While the wreck is little more than a large collection of boards nailed together to form what was once a vessel's underside, it's a cool sight and a popular snorkeling place for my cousins.

There will certainly not be any use of the boat right now, with the lake frozen like this and the snow falling. I grow tired of standing and sit down in the rocking chair against the back

wall. Hanging above me is a set of giant moose antlers, a trophy from one of my grandpa's hunting trips in Alaska. Beneath the antlers the wall is decorated with two pictures showing Grandpa with the freshly-shot giant, along with a trophy plaque given to him by the NRA. Caribou antlers—another trophy—hang on the left wall, and on the right wall is a model of an enormous king salmon Grandpa caught in an Alaskan river, much bigger than any reeled in on Lake Huron. A picture next to the model shows Grandpa proudly holding the giant salmon, its body stretching from the ground to his chest. In a corner of the room are hunting trophies that are more local in origin: three sets of deer antlers from bucks shot in the woods behind this house. Grandpa's love of hunting has passed from him to my dad, who sometimes comes to this house by himself to hunt deer, but it has curiously missed my brother and me. Neither of us hunts, although we always wish Dad and Grandpa luck each deer season. We have, however, inherited their love of fishing, both salmon fishing on Lake Huron and fishing for bass and panfish from shore.

This room isn't the only one with artifacts from Alaska. My grandparents lived there for many years, and reminders of the state are everywhere. Down the hall a black piece of whale baleen hangs above a set of long, formidable-looking walrus tusks. Framed pictures along the wall show magnificent mountains and wildlife such as moose, bear, and sea lions. Downstairs in the dining room there are beautiful paintings of sled dogs and eagles, and at the entrance of the house is the "Bear Room." Hanging here on a wall is "Brownie," the rug made from a large brown bear. Shot by Grandpa long ago, his jaws are forever locked in a snarl. The door leading outside from the Bear Room greets visitors with a beautiful wood carving of a brown bear standing on its hind legs. Other Alaskan items found in the house include a moose wind chime,

small wood carvings, and calendars. Even though my grandparents live in Michigan, I suspect that part of them will always remain in that huge rugged state of the far north.

Their time in Alaska was a big reason my grandparents desired a beautiful natural setting when they looked for a retirement home closer to family. They came to Presque Isle after they read an ad for plots there in the *Detroit News*, and they found this cove to be perfect for them with its huge forest and beautiful view of Lake Huron. With two sets of grandchildren and many friends my grandparents knew that they'd have many guests, so they built a huge house with two floors and four bedrooms to provide room for everyone.

Found in the northern Lower Peninsula of Michigan near Alpena, Presque Isle is sandwiched between Lake Huron to the east and Grand Lake to the west, connected to the mainland by narrow strips of land at the north and south ends. Its name is French for *peninsula*, and literally means "almost an island." Presque Isle County has a rich maritime history, with two lighthouses, and is home to the two largest limestone quarries in the world. The county is heavily wooded, with twenty percent of its area occupied by state recreational land.

My yearly trips to Presque Isle have been a significant contribution to my love of the natural world that I've had most of my life. My house is in a southern Michigan suburb where most trees are in backyards and the most exciting animal I can readily see is a squirrel. Such surroundings are hardly ideal for developing an interest in nature. When I started visiting Presque Isle, however, I found a landscape that was much wilder than I was used to. Often in the evening during those early visits my grandparents would get my family and me into their van, and we'd drive aimlessly around Presque Isle looking for deer, turkeys, porcupines, and whatever else would cross our path. They'd take us hiking on the trails that they'd made in the

woods, which seemed to extend forever through open clearings and thick forest. It was a side of Michigan I didn't see back home, and I quickly came to prefer a forested landscape to a developed suburb.

The snow continues to fall, sheets of white blowing in the wind. The snow buntings are back for more birdseed, and as they drop from the sky one lands on the balcony railing just a few feet from the window. It seems to stare through the glass at me, a plucky, plump little bird dressed in white, black, and brown. After a few seconds it spreads its wings and dives out of sight to join its companions on the ground.

Several blue jays and a male cardinal are perched in the tree, flashes of blue and red against the green branches. The tree blocks part of the view of Lake Huron, so when they built the house my grandparents considered cutting it down. In the end they let it stand, and no one's regretted their decision. The tree is a convenient place to hang feeders and suet in winter, and a popular perch for wildlife in any season. One winter night a flying squirrel glided to the tree to get at a hanging feeder. In the summer warblers of several species can be seen hopping around its branches, and ruby-throated hummingbirds use it as a perch when they're not drinking from the red nectar feeders hung from the side of the house.

I raise the chair's footrest and lean back in relaxation. Many would undoubtedly be bored with doing nothing but enjoying the scenery, but I can always find something to look at. Often just the possibility of seeing something exciting come by is enough to keep me staring into space. The snow will stop soon enough, and perhaps then I'll find something to do outside, but right now I'm content to just sit in this chair and watch the world go by.

Everything changes with time, and that includes Presque Isle. There are more people in Presque Isle now than there was when the house was first built; every year there seems to be a new house or cabin under construction. With so much forest around there's no immediate risk of it all being developed, but I still get nervous about it sometimes. In addition, in recent years I've developed a case of Mal de Debarquement syndrome, a rare condition that gives me motion sickness after getting off a boat. This means that I don't go out on Lake Huron much these days. I also do fewer physical activities with my grandparents, as Grandpa has developed arthritis that keeps him from doing as much outdoors as he used to. Then there are the changes to Lake Huron itself, which include lowering lake levels and the devastating effects of invasive species.

And yet, while some things change others remain the same. The forest around Cedar Cove looks much the same as it did when the house was first built. Wildlife is still abundant; even now, well over a decade since the house was built, I'm still seeing species during visits that I haven't seen before. The past few years have had a lot of snow, which have raised the lake level a little bit closer to what it used to be.

Finally the snow stops. I rise from the chair and gaze at the sky, and notice that the clouds aren't as dark. It looks like the snowfall is over, for now. A few minutes later soft footsteps come behind me as my brother enters the room, telling me that everyone's going for a walk out on the ice caps.

As I prepare to leave for downstairs, movement in the distance catches my eye. A large, dark bird is approaching the house from the north. Another crow? No—as it draws closer I quickly realize that its great size and the power of its wing strokes are far different from any

crow or raven. I grab my binoculars from the lamp desk and focus on the bird to see the pure white head and tail of a mature bald eagle.

As I watch the eagle flies over the frozen lake in front of the house. The great bird neither stops to perch on the ice nor deviates from its flight path. Soon it's lost to sight as it flies over the southern treeline towards the nearby quarry. It was in my sight for only a minute, but it was a fresh reminder of the beauty of this place. With that I turn and leave the room, heading downstairs for another adventure.