

FOREST BATH

Narrative: Sue Schuit

And into the forest I go to lose my mind and find my soul – John Muir

Never have we been so divorced from nature. By 2050, 66% of the world's population is projected to live in cities. According to a study sponsored by the EPA, the average American spends 93% of their time indoors. And, I suspect, for many, this is a conscious choice.

Tragic.

Perhaps, yes perhaps, Muir's beautiful quote would give pause to a city dweller or couch potato - there is no better way to turn off the intellectual mind chatter than a walk in the woods. Enter a living, green hush. Feel the powerful effects of a forest. To consciously pursue self-forgetfulness is to bridge the gap between unnatural and nature. Enter the green peace – alone and alert - and you will leave with the calm cast before you.

A Special Side of Nature

“Nature,” said Heraclitus, “is wont to hide herself”.

I wonder if what we see and believe we understand about nature is simply a chance accident, a lucky encounter? When we enter the woods or leave the house or even pass by a window for that matter, squirrels race for cover, jays scream in alarm, insects scatter, tadpoles dive, frogs leap and birds vanish. Why do they hide? Nature will shoot you an almighty glance, a come-hither look and then will turn tail and run.

I received such a glance one summer day while doing something perfectly ordinary. Just on the brink of entering the back door, out of the sky dropped a bomb. A split-second impression of a large, flapping shape and whirring noise had come from nowhere and was now directly at face level. For what seemed several seconds but was most probably one, a hawk had dropped from the sky and neither of us had seen the other. For a very brief moment we were face to face staring into one another's eyes – both equally startled. And then he was gone. That eye to eye, intent look into the wild eye of nature, equally as surprised as I, was a sight I will ever be able to picture in my mind's eye. I do wonder, what did the hawk see when he looked into mine? Was he as shaken as I at the almighty nature he had encountered?

But then there's the nature that will not dash and dive for cover. Trees, mountains, lakes and streams – reliable nature – the mountains remain, the lakes and streams run on, the trees are rooted to the spot – whether you wish it or know it or care. Some stillness besides this other side of nature may allow for the touch-and-go chance encounter with inconstant nature – the nature who remains unseen, until they are not.

At this point what you don't do matters. Don't talk, do watch. It demands full attention. While you are waiting – quietly – you may see various special things who are happily oblivious to your presence, the realm where power and beauty hold sway.

Quercus Rubra (Red Oak)

What you see is not what you get, what you see gets you – Mitch Ditkof

The Red Oak tree is also known as *Quercus rubra* and the *Champion Oak Tree*. Red Oaks are tall, sturdy trees. The height of the red oaks can range from 50 - 80 feet and have a width ranging from 2- 3 feet.

The bark of mature trees are dark reddish-brown in color and are broken up into wide ridges that have a flat top. The bark of old trees can become deeply ridged and furrowed as they age.

A unique feature of the bark of the Red Oak tree is that it has a shiny stripe at the center that extends throughout the length of the main trunk.

The Red Oak trees have stout branches arranged at right angles to the main stem. The twigs of the oak trees are thick, reddish to greenish brown in color without hairs. The winter buds are found clustered at the end of the twigs.

The leaves of the oak tree are simple and arranged in an alternate pattern on the twig. The leaves have about 7 – 11 pointed lobes and are 5 – 9 inches long. They have bristles on the edges of the lobes.

The upper surface of the leaf is dull green and the lower surface of the leaf is pale green.

A single tree produces both male and female flowers. The male flowers are arranged in the form of drooping catkins and are yellowish green in color. Female flowers are ovoid in shape and tiny. The blooming period occurs during mid to late spring.

The acorns of the Red Oak trees mature in two growing seasons. After pollination, the acorns of the red oak take about two years to develop. They are large, broad and rounded with a shallow, saucer-shaped cap.

Protecting or planting an oak is the single most important thing we can do to support wildlife.

Native insects cannot, or will not, eat non-native plants. When native plants disappear, the insects disappear, and depletes a major food source for birds and other animals.

As a birder who loves spring migration, I have long noticed that my beloved warblers and other colorful birds prefer the native oak trees. On May mornings, just when their foliage is emerging, I scan the oaks. That's where I find American Redstarts, Blackburnian Warblers, Scarlet Tanagers and other favorites in their resplendent spring plumage. Only recently have I learned why these birds are in the oaks. I credit Doug Tallamy, author of *Bringing Nature Home*. Oaks, according to Tallamy, support 534 species of lepidoptera (butterfly and moth) caterpillars, more than any other native tree or plant. These caterpillars are not only the primary food source for migrating and breeding birds, but are essential for baby birds – a

veritable moving feast. Other native plants support caterpillars, too, but non-native plants host very few at all.

I've always known that acorns are important food for turkeys, woodpeckers, jays, nuthatches, squirrels, chipmunks and other animals. However, birds and other animals are even more dependent on the insects that munch on the oak leaves.

According to Tallamy, in addition to myriad lepidoptera species, oaks host aphids, leafhoppers, thrips, and other bugs – all target foods for animals throughout each growing season. An oak will host an inestimable number of birds, insects and other wildlife during a lifetime and for generations to come. – Edie Parnum, backyards for nature.org.

Vacant Land

God has cared for these trees,
saved them from drought, disease, avalanches,
and a thousand tempests and floods.
But he cannot save them from fools.

- John Muir

Two hundred years are nearly here and this champion oak will flourish still when they are gone. Many sights I've seen while I stand here still, many changes I've been witness to. I've been through the droughts, disease, the tempest and floods and I have been saved from fools.

So many things have been shown me, so many things I've shown. So many rays have warmed me, I've been illumined by so much sunlight. Countless twilights I've faded from sight with the shadows, lit by the full moon for so many evenings and hidden by endless dark nights.

In the days of my youth I was a woodland tree set upon a hill, one small part of a large forest intersected by the Root River. Settlers along the lake were rapidly moving west and by 1855 my domain is recorded to be in the possession of Henry Higgins Hurlbut, a pioneer resident of Racine. H.H. Hurlbut married Elizabeth (Sykes) Graves, whom was a direct descendant of John Alden, "Mayflower" passenger in 1620. H.H. had 3 children; Sydney Sykes Hurlbut, Jonathon Henry, and Harriet Hurlbut. Harriet Street in Racine was named for Harriet Hurlbut by her husband. A number of reminiscences of H. H. Hurlbut are inscribed on a sheet of cardboard, about 24" square, now in the Manuscript Dept. of the State Historical Society.

Within an inch of the edge of the card, and completely encircling its border, has been inscribed, in beautiful Old English letter, the following lines, -

"From the Rock of the Plymouth Pilgrims,
From "Green Mountain" slopes and vales;
From the "Empire" and the "Keystone",
From the pleasant "Buckeye" dales;

From the bonnie braes of Scotland,
From Old England, Erin, Wales;
From realm of Deutsch and Norsemen,
The Wisconsin settler hails”

- H.H. Hurlbut’s Reminiscences’

Narrators aside; Is it any wonder that 2 icons of conservation, John Muir and Aldo Leopold hail from Wisconsin?

An 1887 map shows that I am now in the purview of W. Smieding. This map is unlike earlier ones in that there are many more names and much less forest. There are many familiar names such as Case and Pugh in close vicinity and by 1908 neighboring land was owned by Theodore VanBree, W. Horlick and “Idle-Wild Stock Farm”; owner C.A. Wustum.

In 1911 an easement to the east of the Root River was granted by Theo and Laura Van Bree to the Racine Water Company as well as an easement to the west of the Root River granted in 1927 by H.C. and Annie Case to the Milwaukee Electric Railway and Light Company. The wooded land in between was vacant low-land, prone to flooding and as such, of little value to developers.

In 1974 the City of Racine purchased the land for \$10,000.

This long-vacate land is now known as Colonial Park – beloved to spring warblers and migratory birds and known to birders nationwide. My domain is now on the perimeter of Colonial Park and is known as Maria St. Maria St. first appeared as Marie Street in the Smieding Partition in 1930 and was changed to Maria St. by the Common Council Proceedings of June 3, 1970.

Champion Oak

Despite so much change, I persist and endure; I’m at the cutting edge of each new season. And just as everything green in this world, I run on sun, rain and air. Life - both mine and yours - beneath the stars is chancy at best; we’re all in need of salvation from fools and tools. Time however, is the one true constant and the common comfort to all, the loop that never ends. Time after time the sun will rise and set, the cycle of the seasons will always flow and the moon, through eternity, will always wax and wane.

Then here’s to the oak, the brave old oak!
Who stand’s in his pride alone!
And still flourish he, a hale green tree.
When a hundred years are gone.
J.F. Chorley, 1808-1872

**TREES WE LOVE, 2019
HOY AUDUBON SOCIETY
RED OAK (QUERCUS RUBRA)
APPROX. AGE 180 YEARS
DIAMETER AT BREAST HEIGHT: 46"
HEIGHT: 60'
PROUD STEWARDS: THE VANDELEEST FAMILY, 1595 MARIA ST., RACINE
NOMINATOR: BERNARDINE HOFF**