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LIVING

There is listing, and knowing

Collecting sightings gives way to study of traits, habitat and the bigger picture

love Algonquin Park, and one of my favourite things to do there is to walk the park's superb interpretive trails. I always pick up one of the illustrated guide booklets and slowly make my way along the path, mentally ticking off the many species of flora and fauna I see and hear along the way. I'm always amazed, however - and somewhat disheartened - by the number of people who rush by me on the trail as if they are in some kind of race to see who can get to the end first. I can't help but wonder if they actually notice anything along the way other than maybe a rock or protruding root to avoid. I can't help but think that for many people, the woods are little more than a green blur composed of species they cannot name or, for that matter, even notice. The same is true for the sounds of the birds and insects. As Bernd Heinrich writes in his book, A Year in the Maine Woods, "To walk in the woods and not recognize the songs is to not hear them. ... Most of us are like sleepwalkers here, because we notice so little."



Drew Monkman OUR

CHANGING SEASONS

My purpose in writing this is not to criticize. I can understand that there are many ways to enjoy the experience of walking through a natural environment. Yet, it's sad that people miss out on so much pleasure and intimacy with nature by not recognizing - and putting a name to - much of what they see. It is also bad for the future of conservation. When people become blind to the natural world they have little incentive to fight for its protection. And it's not because these people somehow lack the ability or the force of memory to learn the names. Granted, they may need a naturalist interpreter to help them make sense of species in a forest, but these same people would never need such assistance when wandering through stores in a mall or driving along Lansdowne St. They would instantly recognize and be able to name hundreds of company logos. I even know some kids who can, t a glance, identify just about ev model of car on the road, despite so many being nearly identical. However, many of these same children would be hard pressed to name 10 species of plants or animals that share their own neighbourhood.

THE PAYOFFS

To me, it's a real joy to be able to put a name to most of the plants and animals I see and hear when out walking in nature. In many ways, it's like being among good friends. You never tire of seeing them and are always curious about their lives. On the other hand, to walk in the woods or fields and not recognize most of what I observe would be like going to a gallery of abstract art, something about which I know very little. I would probably become bored very quickly and only give the paintings a cursory glance. Granted, I might have some appreciation for the use of line or colour, but I know I would be missing out on a great deal. Without knowing anything about the artists themselves, their technique or the story behind their paintings, I would not be able to feel

anything for their work. This would create the erroneous impression that the paintings nature probably elicits the same reaction in many people. There is a wonderful feeling of confi-

dence and control in being able put names to what you see and hear in the woods, fields and wetlands. You experience the serenity of being in familiar territory. There is also something very intellectually and emotionally satisfying about using your eyes and ears, along with your knowledge of the habitat, time of year and recent weather, to put together a mental list of what species to expect. This, of course, makes actually finding them all the easier. A related payoff is that your sense of place and season is greatly enhanced. Being able to recognize and name the common species reinforces the emotional connection with where you live. To walk your property, neighbourhood or local park and be able to name the common trees and shrubs, point out the songs of some of the most familiar birds and put a name to the flowers blooming in the woods or fields strengthens your bond to the land, makes you want to care for it and to learn more about it. I know

become veritable experts on the flora and fauna of their property and for whom it is a great joy to see their pink lady's slippers blossom each May, hear their gray treefrogs call each June and smell the blossoms of their basswood trees each July.

SIMILAR, BUT DIFFERENT

Identifying and naming helps you to see the differences in how similar species look and behave. In this way, you begin to see the natural order of living things and how closely many kinds of plants or animals are related. This, in turn, increases your awareness and appreciation for the process of evolution. Darwin provided the most famous example in his observations of finches on the Galapagos Islands. Although the birds looked superficially quite similar and had descended from a common ancestor, he noticed that some had stout beaks for eating seeds, some had more slender beaks adapted to eating insects and one had a beak like a woodpecker to drill holes. The hairy

things. For some birders, a large part of bird-watching's appeal is to acquire as big a list of "life" birds as possible. Instead of collecting coins or stamps, the birder is collecting names on a list. At the most basic level, having a list or record of what you've seen is simply fun. Looking over the names gives a strange satisfaction and evokes a flood of memories. Eventually, however, observing birds simply for the sake of listing them loses its appeal. The vast majority of birders shift towards learning more about the various species and helping to protect them. You can't be a birder without eventually becoming an environmentalist. **THE JOURNEY**

I think it's fair to say that humans also

have an inherent desire to collect

My interest in identifying and naming nature began with birds, too. I also went through a phase in which running up a big life list was my main incentive. However, I began to realize that being a good birder also required knowledge about the types of habitats birds frequent. This meant learning the trees and shrubs and eventually the wildflowers. My interest in butterflies and dragonflies was a direct result of the let-down I would always feel at the end of the spring birding season. Because these insects become most common during the summer months when bird activity slows down, butterfly and dragonfly identification is the perfect

replacement. My interest in other groups of organisms such as fungi, non-flowering plants, amphibians and reptiles came from my growing curiosity about seasonal change and what species were most active or visible each season.

Clearly, no one is ever going to learn the names of all the species. Just learning the myriad species of sedges, fungi or insects would take several lifetimes. I have only begun to scratch the surface. Like most people, I also forget a lot of the names I used to know. I was thinking of this recently when looking at some ferns. "Hey, I used to know what this is!"

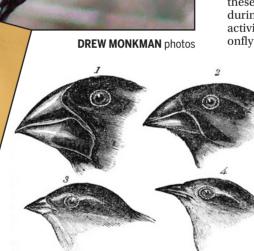
What is important, however, is to learn the most common species. A good starting point is being able to identify familiar trees, roadside flowers

and commonly seen or heard birds species in your vard and neighbourhood. Another approach is to simply focus on one group of organisms such as trees but to expand the area and habitats you cover. Fall is a great time to learn the trees, since the colour of the leaves often helps with identification. As for birds, I would recommend Ebird (ebird.org). It is a great Internet resource for keeping track of your sightings and for finding out what other people are seeing.

Now, more than ever before, there is an urgency for people to feel connected to the natural world. I believe that being able to name much of what you see and hear is a big part of the connection

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many analogies here in the Kawarthas. They are practically identical except for their body size and length of bill. A HUMAN URGE As biologist Carol Kaesuk Yoon



The nearly identical hairy woodpecker (top left) and downy woodpecker, like the finches in these drawings, illustrate how closely related yet different similar species can be. At left are cover and page from Drew Monkman's first bird checklist.

explains in her recent book Naming Nature, humans are born with a desire to name life. Our brains are no less than hard-wired to do so. Yoon describes how Ernst Mayr, a German ornithologist, discovered that one ancient tribe of New Guinea natives had names in their indigenous language for all 136 bird species found close to where they lived. Amazingly, western scientists had names for 137. Therefore, these socalled "primitives" ordered and named species the same way the scientists did. Yoon gives examples from all over the world how folk taxonomies - the science of classifying and naming species are very close to ours. Just by virtue of being Homo sapiens, humans can be counted on to take notice of the same living world and follow the same, preand downy woodpeckers are one of cise taxonomic dictates.