

September 30, 2008

Saying Goodbye to Summer

Crossing Anstruther Lake on this the last day of summer, I realized I should have dressed more warmly. But, despite the 10C temperature, it was hard not to be impressed with the splashes of crimson along the shoreline, courtesy of red maples cloudless sky, and the waning quarter moon staring down from a cloudless sky.

We were heading up to Rathbun Lake to a friend's cabin. Rathbun is most easily accessed by taking a short portage off the northeast arm of Anstruther, just west of Apsley. Both lakes are located in Kawartha Highlands Provincial Park, the largest park in Ontario south of Algonquin. Hugging the southern edge of the Canadian Shield, this area offers a rugged, rolling landscape of small lakes, wetlands, forests and rocky barrens. The park, however, is not yet operational.

We left the boat at the portage dock and carried our belongings the short distance across to the other side. Despite what the calendar was saying, autumn was very much in evidence, and there was lots to grab our attention, even on the portage. A small grove of staghorn sumacs was resplendent in its bright oranges and reds. Bracken ferns, already nipped by early frosts, glowed yellow-bronze in the morning sun. The main show, however, belonged to the red maple, the first tree to reach its colour peak in the fall. No other maple can hold a candle to *Acer rubrum*. Offering up everything from lemon yellow to deep purple - and all imaginable colours and gradations in between - red maples often look like a crazed spray painter has been at work, decorating the leaves with speckles, blotches and washes of the entire fall colour spectrum. This is a tree that marches to its own drummer. Very differently coloured leaves even appear on the same tree which is strange when you think they are genetically uniform. In northern Peterborough County, red maples are most noticeable along shorelines, where they stand out prominently against their conifer neighbours.

After transferring our gear to a couple of canoes, we paddled the short distance up Rathbun Lake to the cabin, all the while keeping an eye out for merlins that we had seen here earlier in the summer. In addition to the maples, royal ferns growing along the shoreline were putting on a nice display.. Almost invisible in the green blur of summer vegetation, they had now begun to stand out in their smoky-yellow autumn garb.

We tied up the canoes at the dock and climbed the steep hill to the cabin. My friend gave us a quick tour of his property, pointing out that nearly all of the trees here were eastern hemlocks. Hemlocks are typical of north-facing slopes where they thrive in the damper, more shady conditions. However, where sunlight was able to penetrate, an interesting variety of coniferous forest plants was present. These included pipsissewa, clintonia, trailing arbutus, sarsaparilla, bunchberry, partridgeberry and wintergreen. Red berries were still present on some individuals of the latter three species. The leaves and berries of the wintergreen, of course, have a distinctive minty flavour and are pleasant to chew on.

It was far too nice a day to simply stay at the cabin, so we decided to explore the land between Rathbun and Anstruther. One of the first things we noticed was the exceptionally heavy crop of cones on the white pines. The cones literally glistened in the sun and seemed to be covered with an unusually high amount of resin. Some even had pine resin hanging icicle-like from the bottom. We also remarked that most of the cones were already open and shedding their seeds.

Such an offering of free food does not go unnoticed by the forest's many herbivores. We watched as red-breasted nuthatches made repeated feeding trips to the cones to extract the seeds. The birds were everywhere this particular day and constantly advertised their presence with their nasal call which sounds similar to a toy horn. Like chickadees, red-breasted nuthatches respond almost immediately to pishing. One bird approached to less than one metre from us, almost grazing my head in the process. All the while, it called non-stop and repeatedly spread its wings as if to bow.

Because of the abundant seed crop on the white pines, there is a major southerly movement of red-breasted nuthatches underway right now. Most of the birds are coming down from northern Ontario. Large numbers of nuthatches are expected to winter in Ontario this year as they take advantage of the abundant natural food available. This species is also a regular visitor to feeders.

One of the outstanding features of the Kawartha Highlands area is its gneissic rock ridges and barrens. In fact, over 60% of the region in which the park is located consists of bare bedrock. One of the species we were

hoping to find on the rocks was the five-lined skink, Ontario's only lizard and a provincially-rare species. My friend had seen them here several times before. Unfortunately, they did not show up on this particular day. Skinks are able to detach - and later regrow - their tail as a means of escaping predators.

In some of the damper, more shaded areas, the rocks were covered with an interesting assortment of lichens and mosses. Juniper moss and reindeer lichen were especially abundant, the latter cracking underfoot as we walked along. Because of the extremely shallow to nonexistent soils on these rock barrens, the vegetation is particularly susceptible to disturbance by vehicles and by trampling.

Wherever deeper soils were present, it was hard not to notice the violet-blue flowerheads of purple-stemmed and ciliolate asters. This can be a confusing genus of plants to identify but it's still interesting to try. Asters are the last wildflowers of the year and just about the only source of nectar for fall bees and wasps. We watched as red and yellow meadowhawk dragonflies and spreadwing damselflies used them as landing pads between hunting forays.

Although fall is not an especially good time of year for smells, the sweet fragrance of sweetfern shrubs caught our attention as the sun's warmth was releasing the volatile chemicals in the leaves. Every time I smell this plant, it seems to say: "This is Canadian Shield country." As for our sense of taste, the scattered blackberry plants on the ridges still retained some of their delicious fruit which we naturally had to stop and sample.

Although birds don't sing in the fall, they do continue to make contact calls as was evident by the shrill "jaaaaaay" of blue jays, the croaking of ravens and the constant nasal "ink" sound of nuthatches. On two occasions, we almost thought we were hearing a pack of barking dogs when 100 or more northern Canada geese passed high overhead. This is the race that breeds on the shores of James Bay and winters in the Tennessee Valley. They are always a treat to see and hear and never fail to stir the soul. Also keeping us company was a constant chorus of ground crickets. These tiny insects create a gentle wall of sound that almost goes unnoticed unless you really pay attention.

Eastern chipmunks were also very vocal and could be heard clucking at one or two second intervals all day long. Although the exact purpose of the clucking sound is not fully understood, it may have something to do with the fact that chipmunks have a second mating season in late summer. The animals are also feeding heavily at this time of year and territorial skirmishes are inevitable.

When we arrived at Anstruther Lake, the forest cover was quite a bit heavier and more birds seemed to present. Whenever we heard a chickadee call, we would stop and make a pishing sound to try to draw the bird in. It wasn't the chickadee we were really after, though. Small flocks of warblers almost always accompany chickadees during fall migration and are usually just as curious as their black-capped friends. As per usual, the chickadee would come in first to investigate the noise, followed by a handful of nuthatches. Then, seemingly materializing out of thin air, the main show would arrive. This included warblers such as black-and-whites, magnolias, yellow-rumpeds, numerous black-throated greens, an ovenbird, and even a northern parula. A blue-headed vireo also made an appearance as did a dozen or so ruby-crowned kinglets.

On our way back to the cabin, we walked along another trail which wound through hemlock forest. Almost all of the trees were riddled with the drillings of yellow-bellied sapsucker. This area had an interesting coterie of fungi which included puffballs, coral mushrooms and brightly coloured waxcap mushrooms. All indicators seem to point to a good fall for fungi. We also came across a type of viburnum shrub known as hobblebush. It was magnificent with its brilliant wine-red leaves and scarlet fruit. Maple-leaved viburnum was also common along the trail. It will turn a unique shade of pink later in the fall.

After a little bit of cross-country bushwacking - our trail had more or less disappeared on us - we arrived back at the cabin, grabbed our lunches and relaxed for an hour or so in the late afternoon sun. A pileated woodpecker calling repeatedly in the distance provided entertainment while we ate.

We extended the trip back to the portage by paddling around the entire perimeter of the lake and taking pictures of the magnificent maples along the shoreline. A pair of turkey vultures slowly drifting southward kept us company for a short while, as well. The day had been a delightful way to say goodbye to summer.

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