

OUTDOORS

Time in woods is good for the soul

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Last summer I sat in a wild blueberry patch in the northern Michigan woods, fending off a few insects, but mostly feeling like I was back home.

The northern landscape is heaven to me. It's where I spent my summers growing up, breathing the clean, pine-scented air. I loved the endless expanses of beach, lake and sky; the deep woods, which seemed not to belong to anyone; and, of course, the wild berries.

Berry picking was a bit of a chore at the time — I could never quite keep up with mom and grandma, nor was I really motivated to pick berries to take home. I was more interested in wandering dreamily into the woods, pretending I could subsist in wilderness and communicate with the animals.

I picked up some nature lore from my parents and grandparents. I could identify the important plants — strawberries, blueberries and poison ivy — and I knew where to find curiosities like jack-in-the-pulpit, pink lady

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slipper and carnivorous pitcher plants. I knew how to trick an ant lion into attacking a long pine needle by using it to mimic an ant falling into his cone-shaped sand trap.

But for all my absorption with the natural world, there were a lot of facts I didn't know.

I didn't know the names of the birds by the sounds of their calls. There was one song I first heard on a solo walk in the woods which stopped my heart with its liquid beauty. It was a rainbow of sound, and I didn't want to see the bird, for I was sure it could not be as beautiful and magical as I imagined.

For years I resisted even talking to anyone about this song for fear of shattering the illusion. Much later, after listening to a tape of bird songs, I decided it was probably a wood thrush. I'm glad to know now a real bird is better than an imaginary one, but I'm also still glad to have encountered it the way I did, feeling I had made an original discovery and utterly in awe.

There is no comparison to meeting nature face to face for expanding the spirit. In addition to the physical benefits of fresh air and exercise, it's good for your mind to slow down and see the world from a different perspective.

Now that life is busier, I'm lucky if I get up north for one week each summer. I have to make a point to get regular doses of the outdoors wherever I can. We are fortunate to still have many parks and nature preserves in our area such as the Kalamazoo Nature center.

These places are to be treasured, but you can even get in touch with nature in your own neighborhood. Take a walk around the block early in the morning before most people are up and about. Look up at the trees and listen to the birds. You may know their names or you may not, but take a minute to listen to them — you might hear something unexpected.

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