

Nature of Merrickville – April 2020 – A Remedy for Cabin Fever

Social isolation doesn't mean we have to stay indoors. Let's step outside for some fresh air and a good dose of spring. Getting into nature is a head-clearing diversion that is entertaining, educational and healthful. And it's as close as your back yard.

The Youth Group of the Ottawa Field Naturalists Club has a thing: they go to the same conservation area every two weeks to play and explore and each kid has chosen a tree. S/he will get to know that tree and how it relates to the world around it, studying it in detail, observing changes with notes, photos and drawings as the seasons cycle and the years go by.

Your recipe: take one tree -- it's all you really need. Give it a name. Give it a hug – a tree's heart is right opposite yours. Remember, too, that a tree has as much mass underground as it does above – the root system is as wide as the tree and can be as deep as the tree is tall. Ideally, your tree has moss or lichens growing on it and maybe mushrooms at its feet.

Moss is green and spongy-damp. It takes a long time to grow and is easily disturbed, so try not to knock it off. Being green, it is able to convert sunlight and water into sugar, through photosynthesis. Green plants, from single-celled algae to giant Redwoods, are the first link in any food chain and produce ALL the oxygen on our planet. Animal life, our life, could not survive without them. In order to do this, green plants take in the carbon dioxide that animals exhale and that our factories and vehicles now produce a LOT of. Plants deserve our respect and care; tell one “thank you” and give it a little gift of your CO₂. (Interestingly, isolation = reduced CO₂ – a boon to the fight against climate change. May lessons be learned.)

Lichens come in lots of colours (yellow, orange, red, grey, black...) and are found growing everywhere that the air is relatively pollution-free, on pretty much any surface (rocks, trees, tombstones, dead cars...). They can be leafy, crusty, stringy or branched and do not harm the substrate they grow on. Lichens are a unique life-form: a *symbiosis* of fungus and alga living in perfect harmony, called *mutualism*: the alga produces sugars and the fungus takes care of growth and reproduction. See the Canadian Museum of Nature website for info about selecting Canada's national lichen!

Mosses and lichens reproduce with spores from fruiting bodies that stand tall above their tiny realm. Take a magnifying glass and observe the complexity and diversity of these beings. How many varieties of lichens can you find on one tree?

Mushrooms are the fruiting bodies of fungi, which have an impressive mass of very thin 'roots', or hyphae, that infiltrate the life form that the mushroom is growing on. All life forms need nitrogen to build tissues and if a green plant cannot *fix* nitrogen itself, it has a fungus growing alongside it, providing its roots with nitrogen, in exchange for sugar from the plant. If a fungus is not helping green things grow, it may be helping to break them down, as a *decomposer*.

For the more adventurous, a walk around the track at the library and beach delivers a selection of young and mature trees to visit, many sporting mosses and lichens. Or go explore the huge trees in the park and the campground. Peek under the bark of the big Silver Maples for evidence of Gypsy Moth – a forest pest insect that we really do not want munching all the leaves off our big trees. Feel free to scrape out the fuzzy yellow egg masses, but don't tear the bark off please. Bark is the tree's protective skin and it is thinner than it seems.

A walk along the shrub-covered peninsula, between the Canal cut and the river, will likely offer beaver sign and holes along the path. Who could have made them and who else could live in there? Expect mud and ice in springtime, so always wear well-tied boots or shoes, stay on the paths, slow down and watch where you walk. That way you can appreciate the little things coming to life and maybe even stop to look at them instead of crushing them underfoot.

If you can get to a forest or woodlot, that's a real treat. We have Limerick Forest right at our doorstep – the easy-walking Woodland-Toboggan Hill Trail is tucked in behind Merrickville Public School. See the Merrickville District Trails Society website for trail maps and a guide to a Historic Properties walk in the Village. If you've got a day, walk Scotch Line Rd from Merrickville Estates to Bolton Rd. Don't try to drive it, but a mountain bike would work. Still, that all seems too fast.

Nature is S-L-O-W. That's one of the things that make it so relaxing. Drawing or painting from nature can be blissful and meditative, as you take the time to really see what you are looking at. Nature fills time. It is also healing: the colour green is calming and the chemicals put out by trees have healing properties, especially evergreens. Indigenous people called cedars *Tree of Life*: White-tailed Deer and Snowshoe Hares survive on its leaves in winter; Chickadees eat its seeds and hide their food in cracks and folds in its bark; its branches make lovely-smelling walls and roofs for shelters and sweat lodges; the stringy bark catches fire quickly or can be spun to make rope, and the wood of the cedar is resistant to damp and insects – ideal for canoes, storage chests, outdoor furniture and decks.

I haven't even mentioned birds, bugs and bunnies as excellent recipes for cabin fever. But these are fleeting and unpredictable – not always life forms we can touch and hold. Still, if you are near an old wet field, late afternoon, listen for the Chorus Frogs – the first to awaken in the

spring. They sound like a big fingernail on a loud comb, but they are so tiny – barely bigger than a quarter! They will breed in a large puddle, their tadpoles developing quickly as the puddle slowly dries. From their home in the Cattails, Spring Peepers will be next to join the chorus, also mighty loud, for a frog no bigger than a toonie.

As the Red Wings quiet and night sounds begin, embrace the silence of reduced traffic – surely one of the reasons we live here. Enjoy the howl and yip of coyotes in the woods and the distant call of a Whippoorwill as it flies around the village. At dusk, look for brilliant Venus in the west, a dazzling jewel on a teal blue velvet sky. And if our isolation continues, notice the changing sound of the wind, as leaves begin to fill the trees... May we not forget these moments when our lives become hectic again.

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