

Birds on the brain



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By Nate Smelle

?Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.?? Albert Einstein If someone would have told me at the start of 2020 that I would be agreeing with and sharing Premier Doug Ford's advice before this summer, I probably would have bet them every roll of toilet paper I own. Gladly that bet was never put on the table, because last week I was listening to the radio and heard a sound bite from the Premier where he advised Ontarians to stay home and watch birds while they were practicing social distancing. Since then I have been putting in an extra effort to take the Premier's advice of staying home and bird-watching as much as possible. Stepping up my own personal efforts a notch, I recently started making a list of every bird that flies by my windows or overhead when I am outdoors. So far I have documented several different species including: red-winged blackbird, American robin, ruffed grouse, blue jay, raven, pileated woodpecker, hairy woodpecker, Canadian geese, yellow-bellied sapsucker, and bald eagle. The list actually goes on, but the space here is limited, so I will draw a line there. I guess it is not a big secret that I have a long history of bird-watching. No matter where I have travelled in my life I always return home with more photos of birds and wildlife than I do of people. So, at least in this regard, I suppose it is business as usual. Still, I commend the Premier for making this suggestion to the people of Ontario. Understanding that birds tend to arrive on the scene when the forest becomes still, over the years I have taken up the practice of bringing a book to read and a notebook to write whenever I take a solitary walk in the woods. From these explorations of nature, I have collected several volumes-worth of meaningful quotations once penned by a clique of writers, philosophers, scientists, artists and activists who have gifted me with a deeper appreciation of our place on Earth. Flipping through one of these journals as I wrote this piece, I rediscovered the words of marine biologist and author of *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson highlighting how ?Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts.? Turning the pages randomly, I find naturalist, philosopher, and glaciologist, John Muir reminding me that ?In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks.? Consulting this makeshift oracle again I come across a timely quote from a book called *Nature's Way*, by a Ed ?Eagle Man? McGaa, a registered Teton Oglala Sioux author and U.S. Marine fighter pilot, who returned home from 110 combat missions in Vietnam to dance in six annual Sioux Sun Dances, and study under two Sioux holy men, Chief Eagle Feather and Chief Fools Crow, and Ben Black Elk. In this passage McGaa writes ?Of the 250,000 known species of plants, only five per cent have been analyzed for their medicinal properties. Who knows what cures are awaiting discovery in the remaining 95 percent? Potential new antibiotics like penicillin, cures like quinine, all-purpose medicines like aspirin, and powerful painkilling drugs like morphine could be found in as-yet-undiscovered plants ? but not if those plants become extinct. The World Resources Institute reports that every time we lose a species ? and we are losing a lot ? we lose an option for the future; we lose a potential cure for AIDS or a virus-resistant crop.? As the Earth awakes from its winter slumber and life flourishes again with the coming of spring, there are plenty of opportunities in North Hastings for us to embrace social distancing and the natural world right outside our door.

Once someone has made the decision to devote a portion of their day to watching birds, or just sitting quietly in nature and doing nothing for that matter, it doesn't take long to appreciate the benefits of bird-watching. Physically, we can feel them present in every moment we spend in nature. As Dr. Nooshin Razani of the UCSF Centre for Nature and Health in Oakland, California says "Nature is absolutely essential to human health." By spending time in nature, research has shown that one's cognition, blood pressure and pulse improve, as well as any symptoms of depression and anxiety. With so much fear, depression and anxiety in the world today I think bird-watching might just be what the doctors ordered. Not only will it encourage people to slow the spread of COVID-19 through social distancing, it will also help us develop a deeper understanding of our natural environment and non-human neighbours. And of course, the intrinsic value of nature as a whole.