

Epilogue

Thoughts on Twenty-five Years as a Naturalist

Alongside of my home, across the driveway, about an acre and a half of my own land is growing into a scattering of oak and hickory trees, red cedars, and hazelnut shrubs among dense prairie grasses, prairie wildflowers, and an odd assortment of plants left over from when the land was a working farmstead. We live in the Havana Lowlands, among the sand hills of central Illinois; and so I have begun referring to this land, though perhaps a bit prematurely, as Sand Hill Savanna. Its patriarch is a massive hickory tree, 3 feet in diameter and maybe 90 feet tall, which must surely have begun its life before the Lincoln era, given the slow growth of hickory trees in general and the even slower growth in our sandy soil. Multiple generations have made the decision to let this old hickory grow; I wonder how many in the future will do the same. The patriarch provides a tie to the far distant past, when sand savannas and prairies covered most of the land in this part of Illinois; while its progeny struggle with lack of nutrients and water, re-sprouting from occasional fires toward a future when my lifetime will be forgotten and left far behind.

Side Channels

Sometimes I will sit on our patio and gaze toward the old hickory and the slowly developing savanna, which improves in native plant diversity and community structure with every year, and I'll think about how all of this fits together and how many others might think about or even care about such topics. During these recent years, I do not feel as compelled to wander across the continent or escape among trackless wild areas as I did a quarter century ago. Of course, I am older today and recently married, both of which may have something to do with a modification of priorities. But I think my rather settled temperament of late has more to do with having discovered, over the years, a sort of harmony of mind resulting from a conscious effort to be closely tied to natural rhythms, wherever I happen to be, but especially at home. Home is the place I know the best: from the first red-winged blackbird song in February, to the peak of the Illinois River's spring flood, hordes of annoying buffalo gnats in early June, a changing panorama of flowering plants throughout the growing season, mudflats and shorebirds in August, kettles of migrating broad-winged hawks in September, multitudes of waterfowl crowding the river valley's floodplain lakes from late summer to the first freeze, and numerous other natural events; I feel a part of the whole. And this provides contentment, a calmness, and lack of estrangement from the natural world around me. In fact, the distinction between what is the "natural world" and what is not has, in my mind, become quite superfluous most of the time.

Some others who have made similar discoveries might soon become drawn to extreme activism, as they become focused on issues that are perceived as threats to the natural world as they define it—without the human component. I have stood at the entrance to this road, looked on with a critical, skeptical eye, but have not gone down; the politics and the egos, individuals and groups with agendas and their well-coordinated messages repeated at every turn, I find a disagreeable mix, a poor foundation for trust. So my interests continue to remain centered upon simply accumu-

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lating knowledge of how nature works, especially rivers and bird life; it is a task of personal satisfaction that can never be completed. It is what I started with long ago, and it has been enough to keep me going thus far.

Side Channels



Sand Hill Savanna at home