

Encountering the Wild

By Carol Bennet McCuaig. 2011. Dundurn Press, 3 Church Street, Suite 500, Toronto, Ontario M5E 1M2. 250 pages. 25.00 CAD. Paper.

In the hilly country of Renfrew County, a region of swamps, rock outcrops, small fields, and woodlots, Carol McCuaig and her husband D. W. McCuaig bought a property a number of decades ago and settled there to enjoy the surrounding country and its inhabitants. Their property needed much renovation in the beginning and they installed electricity, running water and other modern necessities. They found that the property also included the residents and visitors from the surrounding forest and wetlands. She named the property *Poison Ivy Acres* in appreciation of the non-productive flora which abounds in the area.

What follows is a captivating series of accounts of the daily sightings of forest visitors to the house and the property. In a modern-day era of managed agricultural properties and artificial natural areas, this book tells of an area close to metropolitan centres which still maintains the flora and fauna of its original ancestors. Birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians and of course plants are all featured in short entertaining stories usually just over a page long. The book is broken into interesting vignettes which take only a couple of minutes to read and invite the reader with pictures, and personal anecdotes to read further as one story ends and the next one begins.

Clearly the best accounts are about the pets: dogs, cats and adopted animals which surround the author and her house. But with stories of birdfeeders, caches of seeds, bird nesting boxes and feeding sites with bread crumbs on occasion, she is a nurturer of wildlife and even the encounters with potentially destructive animals she treats with the tolerance of an observer

rather than a victim. One such encounter was when a porcupine chewed all of the soft parts of her bicycle and its destruction became another story of which the details seemed to interest her more than the loss of a vehicle.

Squirrels, porcupines, skunks, even fishers, bears and wolves form the first, largest part of the book with the second section devoted to plants and the yearly cycle of the area including happenings like ice storms. Bird stories make up the last section and the author an avid bird-watcher has many more anecdotes to relate on this subject. The book has too many anecdotes about the family pets for my liking but the author gives account of spending much time alone on the property and the constant companionship of a succession of dogs and cats were obviously important to her.

If you have ever experienced the close connection to nature whether it be in the hilly farmland of the Ottawa Valley or in any area bounded by gravel back roads, long laneways, darkness away from city lights and the quiet of wind in the trees, the book is a delightful collection of the familiar or a picture of how life could be experienced. The author does not shun people in favour of nature. Numerous references are made to church, neighbours, visitors and family, even the conversion of one of the former barns into a guesthouse. The setting is the story and the reader is treated to a focus of nature, concern for animals, birds, the country and the future of a life experience less and less experienced among active people.

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