

## JIM MOTT SUPPLEMENTARY ARTIST/NATURALIST ESSAY

When I was a child I became an avid drawer at about the age when most of my peers were starting to lose interest in doing art – around first grade, I think. The immediate cause for my enthusiasm was nature. I lived in a rural part of Massachusetts and spent most of my free days exploring woods and fields, swamps and stream banks. I pored over books of Natural History in the library, absorbing the images and whatever words I could read. Drawing birds and mammals (and sometimes the settings where I saw them) became a way that I could affirm the sense of connection I felt with the natural world, make it real. Drawing delivered something tangible, a solid token to hold when everything around was continually changing, vulnerable, and at some existential level painfully out of reach.

And then there were the aspects of nature that bewitched me but could only be marveled at: delicate ice crystal formations along the stream in winter, the mysterious markings I found behind the loose bark of fallen pine limbs – intentional-looking patterns and networks that made me think of human alphabets and human art; they seemed to carry some important message, represent some language that was trying to tell us something. Later, after I had begun to follow art's momentum more for its own sake, I maintained a strong interest in the natural sciences. I was delighted to discover the *Stokes Field Guide to Nature in Winter*, which explained (among other things) that the secret squiggly markings behind the pine bark were the nuptial chambers of certain wood-boring beetles. I was glad to know there was an explanation – one which pointed me toward the study of insects for a while. When I see the beetle borings these days, though, I still can imagine they are expressions of some language beyond words.

In college, and beyond, I studied ecology, systematic botany and geomorphology to learn more about the landscapes I was sketching and painting – not to improve my art but because I was curious about things. I learned the names of all the trees but then would sketch them at night when names no longer mattered and I could only feel their dark and powerful presence. To an extent I felt that the more ways I could understand nature the more complete access I had on a sustaining relationship with this great source of life in all its endless variety, beauty, pattern and change, wonder and terror and comfort.

I've always had good friends, but the trees and birds, plants and rocks, ponds and streams have tended to seem equally important. After some decades of experience in the world, I have an acute awareness not only of our capacity to destroy nature (sensed long ago, when I saw the fright of a chickadee trapped on our screen porch; and understood fully when the road for a new subdivision got bulldozed through the old field and pine woods I'd grown to know so intimately) but also of nature's capacity to respond harshly to the disequilibrium our current human activity represents. The depth of my concern, my willingness to work for better relations with our environment, and the necessary comfort I can still find in the world all derive from the basic, quiet, personal relationship with nature, with place, with plants, animals and land that was fostered in me by interested parents, teachers, professors and friends.

I still have, among my books, a small and tattered *Golden Guide to Pond Life*. And I still look through it now and then to learn the name of a fish I hadn't noticed before, or a snake, or just to get a sense of how much there is that people have studied and named. I like to know that things make sense and fit together in complex but rational ways. Science has its comforts and its excitements. But no field guide will explain why the lines of light reflected from ripples on a pond surface look so enchanting when they dance through the shady underside of the leafy boughs held out by trees along the shore. Not even painting can get at that. Maybe poetry. Maybe religion – I studied that for a while, too. Or maybe one just looks and enjoys, enjoys the cycle of having learned and studied so much only to come back, now and then, to the wonder we perhaps enjoyed more readily in childhood. I still sketch and paint – and read science articles – largely out of a desire to stay open to the wonder, interest, deep poetry (and, yes, the troubling shadows) in the world we see around us – and to share what I find as well as I can.