

11/12/13

Identities, Tim Fox

I Owl

Gravel crunches underfoot as I walk with a full backpack down the old logging road deep in the central Oregon Cascades. Ridgeline shadows stretch across the Lookout Creek watershed, washed with the golden light of a late-September evening. The first day of my six day outing in the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest is drawing to a close and I'm on the lookout for a camp site.

I reach a spur road on the left leading to a high elevation meteorological station. For a moment, I consider pitching my tent on a flat spot by the instrument shed, but the atmosphere doesn't feel right. Besides, there's no water. I move on.

Nothing promising presents itself for another mile, all the way to the upper trailhead of the Lookout Creek old growth trail. There, I leave the road behind and, only a few paces into the trees, enter another world: an old growth grove, deep-shaded and quiet save the splashing music of flowing water.

I scan the slopes, looking for a patch of open level earth among the giant Douglas fir and western hemlock boles, huckleberry bushes and deadfall. As I wander along, my mind wanders back to 1990, my second summer in Oregon, when I was one of hundreds of seasonal field workers hired by the Forest Service to call for northern spotted owls in California, Oregon and Washington.

The divisive owl war that gripped the nation was at its peak and one of the pairs I visited on the front lines lived near where I am now. Even though I never found that pair in this grove, I'm sure they hunted here. It is excellent habitat.

That said, the definition of habitat as something separate from an organism — like a stage on which it performs — is one I came to question the longer I worked with the spotted owl. This view overlooks the fact that the owl can be considered but a feature of the habitats of myriad other forms of life, which suggests an increasing degree of blurring between organisms and habitats with every life form that gains attention.

When, after four years with the Forest Service, I became a research assistant on a long term spotted owl population demography study at the Andrews, I came to see the owl more as one of countless shapes the forest assumes than as an animal that dwells among big trees.

The feature that most exemplifies this awareness for me is the owl's feathers. Unlike most raptors in this region, northern spotted owls don't migrate south in the winter. They are here in rain and snow and cold. Yet, they are not exceptionally downy as one would expect of a non-migrant facing a rainy, snowy, cold Cascade Mountain winter.

The reason for this counterintuitive disparity is the old growth forest, which can buffer temperature extremes at both ends of the spectrum by as much as 20 degrees Fahrenheit in relation to adjacent clearings. The owl wears old growth like another layer of feathers. That is, their preferred habitat provides sufficient thermal protection that they do not have to expend energy growing as much down as they would need if they dwelled in open country.

So, here in the old growth, I am literally experiencing a feature of the owl's meaningful physiology. In other words, the protection I enjoy among the trees makes the forest my feathers as well. I am part owl.

II Lion

In my twenty-three seasons in the Cascades, I've seen eight mountain lions. For all but two sightings, I was inside a vehicle. Yet, despite how fleeting and indirect the sightings were, I felt time pause, every thought and distraction gone. At the moment of recognition, when the hovering dark-tipped tail disqualified all other options, one awareness filled the mind.

Cougar!

Peter Matthiessen wrote of the snow leopard, "It is wonderful how the presence of this creature draws the whole landscape to a point . . ." Here in the Cascades, the mountain lion does the same. This is not mere metaphor. The mountain lion is the focal point of the ecological magnifying lens in this place. It is the hot ray of light into which diffuse beams of distinct Cascadian beings concentrate to beat as a single feline heart. Here in the forest where I've been backpacking for the past six days, I can almost sense that heart thrumming all around me.

Plant's roots web the very flesh of the earth — the rich loam of dark humus and forest soil — drawing into themselves nutrients from the elemental recirculations of decomposition and primary production. The roots take these nutrients and change them with the chlorophyllous gleanings of solar input and grow green and luxuriant. Then elk and deer further the concentration in their nipping and swallowing of leaves, making soil, sun and succulent plant growth into meat.

This concentration is further honed in the sinews of the crouching cougar, golden eyes seeking signs of distress. The ailing bull, the bony calf, the limping cow trigger a blood quickening and the cougar closes in like a spotlight, blinding in her intensity and focus. In her presence.

Pounce, bite, hold. And feed; the whole landscape drawn to a point.

To stand in the landscape where deer and elk concentrate is more than to be in the presence of the cougar. It is to be a part of the cougar, for all of this is literally drawn into the cat, transformed into fur, claws, piercing eyes, beating heart, twitching dark-tipped tail.

I adjust my pack. Quietly. And move on.

III Human

The more you know, the less you need.

Australian Aboriginal Proverb

A rifle crack resounds from out of the east. Why does the typical modern human hunter fail to invoke the same sense of presence as the cougar? The answer I think is to be found in the way of the act, the means, the indirectness of the modern process.

Pick-up trucks ply asphalt, hauling would-be carnivores around at excessive rates, from places beyond the accessibility of the feet. They are not of here. In the means of mobility as well as lethality — using weapons not of the land where the hunt takes place — the modern hunter is more akin to alien parasite than predator. And once a kill is made, the prey is removed

from the local cycles of the land with nothing given in return. In effect, modern human hunting is an act of mining.

After all, in terms of overall energy expended compared to energy gained in the form of elk or deer meat, the modern human hunter comes nowhere near breaking even, let alone acting as a conduit of concentration akin to a cougar. Put another way, the gain in meat calories to human bodies is more than entirely traded away in the exchange for fossil fuel calories expended in the procedures and products used to make the kill as well as to keep it frozen afterward. The deaths fall well short of balancing out when measured by the ultimate gauge of their sustainability: the Earth's annual solar budget.

In the way the modern human hunter substitutes high-energy global commodities made indirectly outside local energy cycles for the aborigines grounded knowledge, the point to which the landscape could be drawn in human form is shattered.

The few humans these days who do approach the hunt in the way of the cougar are seen as idealistic extremists. They are not typical. And I admit I wouldn't begin to know how to be one of them. As a child of suburbia, the life-long accumulation of skills in a conducive cultural context and informed by a community of elders from whom to learn such knowledge, was not part of my experience. And rather than hunt in the typical way, which always struck my intuitive sensibilities as discordant even before I could articulate a reason, I chose not to hunt at all. That I had the freedom to make such a choice shows the strangeness of these times. Throughout the existence of the human species, only now, at this relative instant in the long continuum, have any but royalty had the luxury of making the choice not to participate directly in the life-round without perishing.

But, even so, we must all participate in some way. Most of us do it indirectly through longer linkages, commodity linkages. The challenge now as those linkages become ever more precarious in an age of peak everything is to close the gaps. To need less. Learning how starts with asking questions.

What would it mean, on the one hand, to see the forest as a meaningful part of the human physiology the way it serves as the downy feathers of owls? And, on the other hand, how might we draw the landscape to a point like the mountain lion? How might we participate in local ecological cycles in ways that allow us to discontinue our reliance on mining and come to live well within the annual solar budget of our planet home? How might we sustainably engage the positive qualities we seem uniquely capable of adding to an ecosystem — story, art, poetry, song, dance, empathy, sympathy, compassion — to imagining and enacting cultural self-expressions that serve not only humans, but life as a whole?

It seems to me, asking these questions is, in itself, a way to begin focusing the light of the land, if not to the blazing point of the cougar, at least bright enough to make out the faint outlines of who we really are: owls, lions and forests, and all the other lives with whom we compose the organism known as Earth, an organism who needs us now, more than ever, to make room in the habitat of our hearts.