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Field Notes III

Friday, May 30 – Lookout Mountain Old Growth Trail

Yesterday I accompanied Steve Ackers, a biologist working out of the Andrews Forest, and a visiting photographer named Paul Bannin on a fascinating visit to two spotted owl nesting sites. There wasn't time for much in the way of notes, and I could hardly add anything to the library of material about this famous bird. So today I'm back to my solitary ways, with time again to reflect and write. I drive up the main road along Lookout Creek to take a longer walk on one of the few publicly advertised hiking trails in the HJA. Even this trail receives little use. There are blowdowns to contend with, brushy areas, and steep sidehills, but overall it's in decent shape.

The trail begins with downhill switchbacks leading to a tremendous stand of old trees along the creek. I have some distance I want to cover today, but everything about this forest says "slow down." The great vertical shafts of Douglas fir, others that have fallen to earth, the mosses and lichens that hang everywhere, all exude some essence of time and age. The tangled vegetation trips and throws the hurried traveler. Many slopes – much like those I slid down yesterday with Steve and Paul -- demand careful foot placement lest one be painfully wrenched between two logs or pitched headfirst down the relentless incline. I am conscious of passing through too quickly even at a walking pace. Only a human-made trail allows me to make any headway at all.

Right now I'm resting by the trail after a long pull up this north-facing mountainside. It's a lovely little spot, not the most ancient of old growth, just a stand of mixed fir and hemlock at around 3000 feet elevation, where the forest is transitioning to its Hudsonian components. Along the way I've spotted what Fred calls "researcher trash," odd little things sticking out of the ground and bits of PVC pipe that look as if they're measuring something important. I am barely cognizant of the multi-fold research going on at Andrews, and I could not comprehend it all if I tried, but one thing Fred mentioned on our tour Tuesday that stuck with me was the word "persistence." He used it in several contexts, having to do both with the landscape processes they study here (e.g. the ceanothus seeds that remain viable in the soil for a century or more) and the efforts of researchers to track such processes over decades and even centuries.

Persistence, by definition, can't be hurried. It requires that one adjust one's efforts to fit the underlying rhythms of the land. It demands a long view. All these qualities are needed if we would know the forest as a living organism and even as a "cascade of disturbances," as Fred puts it.

But persistence means something more personal, too. This forest calls out for me to slow down. To cease my endless hurry, my frantic efforts to catch up with work and chores, to get on to the next thing. Perhaps that is one of the qualities of an ancient forest that is not found in a cutover forest. Surprisingly, on some deep level, I feel *less* comfortable here than in a second-growth forest, even amid all this mysterious beauty. Perhaps that is because I find it so difficult to match the stately, measured heartbeat of this forest.

Why should I be concerned at all about making “progress” along this trail? The need for physical activity – a valid interest -- prompts me to keep moving, to maintain a steady pace in order to complete the hike as planned. Yet I’m aware of the need to enter the timescale of this forest, which calls for a slower, perhaps even stationary approach. This alternate yearning — to step out of my accustomed hurry and join the stillness of this forest -- has been with me throughout my stay at the Andrews Forest. I’m fortunate to have this luxury, although I suspect I would need to stay a month to even begin to sense the underlying pace of life here among the big trees. I reside in the “invisible present,” as John Magnuson put it in an influential 1990 article, in which I am unable to sense the gradual changes that modify this forest over the long term.

To Fred Swanson’s “root assumptions” about forestry and society I would add the notion of constant progress as a driving force to our actions. I belong to a culture that glorifies speed, which is the manifestation of progress. Normally this means clearing off the forest as rapidly as possible so that trees will grow faster. It means building paved roads so that one may drive through them quickly. It means damming the streams so that we may tap streamflows when we want them, not when nature delivers them (and to fill reservoirs so that we may boat on them at high speed). It seems like the outside world is engaged in a mighty enterprise of forcing nature to hurry up. To deliver its goods more quickly, to yield fuel and lumber and minerals faster and in greater volume than before, and then to stand aside while we surround ourselves with the humming, buzzing, roaring instruments of speed and power.

Farther up the trail I rest again on a convenient log. A winter (Pacific) wren calls from somewhere fifty yards away. Ahead is a creek whose soft sound carries up to where I sit. My log is pinned in place on the steep downside of the trail by a three-foot-diameter fir, perhaps a silver fir, judging from its canopy. It has some of the noble fir’s graceful lacework effect. *Abies amabilis*, the lovely fir. Ten feet up its trunk, a spiderweb spans a furrow in its bark. The web consists of dozens of radial spans, filled in with perhaps a hundred closely spaced orbits – a net through which few insects could fly. The web shimmers in the faint breeze.

How long did the spider take to weave its web? I ought to sit here all day, a week, a season, and listen and look. Even then I would miss much – the life underground and the small things high in the canopy. Still, it would be a good exercise in patience and observation. I could watch the rhododendron unfurl its leaves, which now sit erect as light-green candles on the tips of small branches. I

could see who comes to investigate the four oblong holes in the red cedar across the trail – which is still alive. Perhaps an owl would visit. I could feel the movement of air on my skin, upslope and back down in its diurnal rhythm. I could hunker in the rain and listen to the plat of drops on the rhody leaves. The pale gold mushroom at my feet would expand further, spreading apart the white flecks on its crown, then grow dark and wither. I might for the first time cease to strive toward a distant goal and join one small locus in the immense body of life all around.