

SACRED WORTH

I grew up with a family cottage in the Canadian Shield. It was Group of Seven country and much appreciated by my mother, an artist. Tagging along with her, while she painted waterfalls, beaver ponds or the lakeshore, I would look for frogs or watch the swirling foam and leaves. I loved it. It felt like home. These happy experiences taught me that it takes time to be in tune with nature. Time to slow down, listen and see. Once we do, nature is inspiration and harmony: what Emily Carr called, "the singing movement of the whole." Art became my way of expressing this love for wildness.

I also leaned toward science, always looking at things, trying to understand nature, how it works and why. Since joining my first nature organization as a child, I have continued to be involved in various environmental groups. About the time I learned that the Nova Scotia Nature Trust was being formed to conserve private lands, the government announced its plan to protect 31 Crown land wilderness areas. I was elated! It became a passion to see, explore and paint them.

Visiting these areas was no simple task. Part of their appeal is that most are remote; you rarely see other humans. Wilderness skills are essential in such places, so I prepared carefully for each trip and travelled with knowledgeable and dependable friends. I could hardly have imagined what lay ahead...

What an experience to be startled by a moose, away above Polletts Cove in the northern highlands - I felt its heavy footfall before we even saw each other! Up Trout River, we discovered the biggest beaver dam I've ever seen. Paddling along Scatarie Island's craggy shore, three porpoises kept us company. The night before, storm petrels were zooming in and out of their burrows under the juniper roots, swooping through the moonlight, their cries strange and haunting.

Turtles, deer and grey jays shared our portages at Cloud Lake. The black flies shared them, too! At Boggy Lake we were surrounded by lushly wooded drumlins and thick, soggy pads of wetland grasses and moss. Snoozing under the hemlocks at Waverley-Salmon River Long Lake, on a solo trek, I was awakened by a pileated woodpecker and examined by a curious ruffed grouse. That evening a great homed owl, voice of the darkening wood, watched my progress homeward.

We spent days along the Canso coastal barrens, kayaking sizeable pre-hurricane swells. Exciting! Also exhilarating was to sight an eagle picking at whale bones cast up on the granite. There was quiet time, too, with the wind and ocean to lull us, the full moon to calm our souls. Halcyon days.

Lake Rossignol was big and blustery, with formidable waves and sun-bleached skeletons of ancient pines. Helicopter flights from Tangier Grand Lake to French River, Cape Breton, gave spectacular views of mazes of lakes, rocky outcrops, wooded hills and river valleys. Hiking up the North River, my companion and I revelled in the sundappled, rugged trail through the forest canyon leading to the great rush of waterfalls. Portipique's towering, old red spruce and deep, snowy gorges left me awestruck. On a canoe trip into the Tobeatic wilderness, we camped where the animals sleep, under whispering white pines, stars twinkling through the boughs. At sunrise, the misty river reflected blazing red maples and ruby huckleberries. Diamonds sparkled on the water.

My memories of these wild places are adorned with such jewels. This is what inspires me to paint.

Many people will never set foot on these lands, so it is an honour to share my experiences. I hope these paintings will show how precious wilderness is and will inspire us to regard it with respect and act accordingly. The earth sustains us. Wild places offer sanctuary. Their rich diversity is not merely a resource ordained for human use. I believe we have a responsibility to care for and protect nature for its own sake and for the sake of all creatures - including ourselves - who depend on it, mind, body and soul.

The Iroquois have a wonderful prayer.

"O Great Spirit, whose breath gives life to the world and whose voice is heard in the soft breeze... Make us wise so that we may understand what you have taught us, help us to learn the lessons you have hidden in every leaf and rock."

We need this sense of wonder, peace and humility - of our place in the whole scheme. This, to me, is the sacred worth of nature.

- Alice Reed