

## Autumn Reading.

by Conrad Vispo

I find a sunny spot, sit down, put on my reading glasses, and delve in. Will there be unexpected plot twists? Will there be cameos by odd characters? Which leads are real and which are red herrings?

I look down at my clutched net and begin to slowly open it. The first out are usually the bees and wasps, seemingly eager to get back to their interrupted flower visiting; I tally them. Next perhaps comes an array of flies, intriguingly diverse if one takes the time to study them: some disguised as bees, some stilt-legged and emerald-colored, some slim and predatory. Next maybe leafhoppers, spitting out of the net like popcorn. I hurry to count them. And now, ants, spiders, true bugs and others begin to bubble out. I take an occasional photograph, but else keep tallying.

I hold a net rather than a book. Yet, as I sit pouring over a catch freshly vacuumed from a nearby apple tree, I realize the literary metaphor is not just a simplistic comparison, but, in some ways, a true likeness. Reading is often a private, imagination-fueled exploration of patterns. In our minds we assemble the story and speculate emotionally and logically about what will come next. Ecologists do the same thing as they try to read the lively land around them. Is autumn really spider season in the orchards? Is this Tree Cricket in my net the same species whose call is ringing in the air? Is the rush of tiny wasps related to the flurry of Tentiform Leafminer Moths in the catch?

To be rigorous, any of these potential patterns will need to be tested against the data and evaluated in more detail, but that doesn't mean one shouldn't dream. In fact, it is those 'dreams' that often lead to the questions, observations, and little discoveries that are the spice of research. Much of that process is more akin to reading than to doing one's taxes.

It is sometimes assumed that by naming and numbering creatures, scientists are stifling a more imaginative, free-flowing interaction with Nature. While 'formal' research is only one way of looking at the land around us, it is not as dry and narrow-minded as might be supposed, nor is an ecological imagination the protected domain of the ecologist. As one learns to 'read' - by getting to know the trees, recognizing bird calls, discerning animal signs - we begin to imagine how those trees are scattered across the landscape, what those birds are doing, where wildlife is finding its paths. We are, by nature, empathetic in that, given an introduction, we begin to wonder about other life, begin to form generalities and stories around it. This is true whether we are hunting, growing, drawing or watching that life.

Libraries sometimes advertise their wares through posters that simply proclaim, "Read". If we read the life and land around us, we won't necessarily agree on our interpretations, but so long as we find a thrill in that reading, in finding a certain flower along a ditch, in realizing which of your soils is best for carrots, in tracing a deer to its bed, in connecting a particular caterpillar to its moth, then we're hooked. It will then become harder to put that book down and to dismiss those other lives around us as irrelevant, inscrutable or somebody else's business. Wariness of misplaced nostalgia shouldn't cloud the fact that many of us, young and old, are less viscerally connected with Nature than former generations. One need only read accounts of past childhoods to realize that. Few are the 'nets' of exploration which we now cast into local Nature.

Such exploration is not just 'cotton-candy' reading. We are changing the world around us in ways we little realize. In one natural realm where eager public observation continues – birds – such data gathering has documented major changes in avian populations, apparently often tied to human changes in land use. Less widely noted, but just as dramatic, are the changes in the insect and plant worlds: the local extinctions of certain butterflies, the drop in large silk moths, the near demise of wild orchids. Ecologically speaking, we have short individual memories. If there aren't raconteurs in each generation and each household to reminisce about past trips afield, past net reading, past hunts for deer, or forays for mushrooms, then our vision of a 'normal' natural world is being constantly reset with each generation, and we are largely blind to long-term change. Those insects in my catch aren't lettered words, but they nonetheless make for rare reading.