

## Wolves in the Woodlot.

by Conrad Vispo.

There are Wolves in this forest. I can remember when I first saw them, watching me watch them. They were a good reminder that the forest was not just about me, that it was held by a consciousness very different from my own. A forest where Wolves howl in the night, speaking of more than bare necessity, is a forest with a different soul. Wolves bring perspective. It is as if you were to pick up a novel and find it to be the biography of your time and place, and yet one in which your life made but a passing cameo. Your sense of center shifts when there are Wolves in the woods.

I saw those Wolves many years ago in Northern Minnesota. There have not been Wolf packs here in Columbia County for 200 years or more (but our Eastern Coyotes can howl up the hollowness when inspired). Although, taxonomically speaking, there are no longer wild Wolves here; figuratively, in terms of wildness, there are still Wolves in these forests, especially in certain forests. If we take Wolves to be one of the most moving (and, to some, threatening) reflections of a forest's wildness, we can ask, who else can still speak to us of the same thing, albeit with a smaller, perhaps less intimidating, voice?

Last year, stumbling around a local swamp forest, I came upon a small butterfly, no longer than a nickel is wide. It was beautifully marked with the tight patterning that makes one wonder about the painter's brush. It was an Arctic Skipper, a species whose southernmost occurrences just nick the County, but which, as the name implies, skips about woodland clearings across Canada and into Alaska. Unlike the Wolf, this creature did not look me in the eye, and it surely inhabits a mental world vast colors away from mine. And yet, to find it changed my feelings for the soul of its forest; these haunts became more "boreal", a word that still inspires wanderlust in me. As we roam about this County, tallying plants, probing under rocks, wetting our feet in salamandary streams, we look for wildness not as some 'yes/no' quality, but as a matter of degree both biological and emotional. We wonder at its patterns; we wonder, to paraphrase Maurice Sedack, 'where are the wild things?'

Perhaps surprisingly, one of the places where we are now looking for this wildness is in farm woodlots. Picture for a moment the lay of the land before European settlement: beyond the areas opened by the work of beaver and American Indians, there was mostly forest. These forests had existed for the majority of the postglacial millennia, although not without gradual changes in composition or the dramatic disturbance of root-wrenching hurricanes or crown-scorching fires. Below those trees, in the rich, black humus formed by the leaf fall of unnumbered autumns; in the duff where dead plant becomes live soil; and hovering as a green layer of life above that groundwork, there were organisms that lived beneath the footfall of the Wolves: fungi, wildflowers, incessantly busy ants, slow-gliding snails and more. With the arrival of the Europeans, many of those forests were clear cut for the resources they could immediately provide and for the space they could give for cultivation or construction. Strip a forest of its trees and graze the opening hard or, even more intrusively, plow the ground, and you have likely destroyed much of the forest's ground-floor riot of life. You may have replaced it with something more valuable in important ways, but you have also impoverished it in other ways.

Not all forests were cut. Steep hills and ridge tops were most often left, but even on flat ground, farmers usually kept a woodlot because it was more valuable on the stump than as cleared land. It was a source of firewood, lumber, maple syrup, nuts, and perhaps some shade and forage for livestock. Some of those woodlots have still never been clear cut, although they may still experience regular selective

cutting. Given their long histories of use, the oldest trees may not top a century or two, but the continuous sheltering cover of the forest canopy means that some of the ground-floor party has been able to persist, a small-voiced wildness. Such woodlots exemplify what we call 'ancient forests'; while all old-growth forests are ancient, not all ancient forests are old growth. Today such patches of 'ancient life' have been swallowed up by the tremendous regrowth of our forests on former pastures and crop fields: with nearly two thirds of its land in forest, the County is currently twice as forested as it was 150 years ago. Especially on flatter ground, where the soil is better for farming, only a small, now-hidden portion of the land is 'ancient forest'.

To survive, we must feed ourselves and provide ourselves with shelter. To ask that people elsewhere plow their land for our food can be self-centered. Further, we like to open house sites in the forest as we quest for its solitude. We can seek better use of the open lands we still have, but some forest clearing will probably continue. If this incipient second clearing is to spare some hint of wildness in the land, then we need to have keen eyes for what we are clearing. Is there unique, if timid, wildness in our old woodlots? If so, are there easy indicators of ancient forests, signs that will let forest owners and managers quickly know what they have? We don't yet know.

Perhaps most importantly, for emotion can render what no ecologist can prove, we need ask what of the Wolf's wildness resonates in people and what causes fear, and then work with our answers. Can we walk those woodlots, query their low life, and then help others feel the thought-provoking otherness of the Wolf in a wild flower or in a butterfly whose flight is but a tickle to the gentlest breeze? It is not a sensation easily forgotten nor is its home then easily abused.