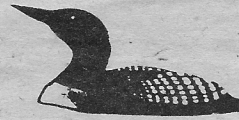


North Country Notebook



George Vukelich

When you watch Marion Moran in her chino pants and lived-in hiking boots moving like a sunbeam across the forest floor, it's easy to picture her as a game warden or a forest ranger or a timber cruiser, all of which she is not.

It's a little harder to picture her as a grandma, all of which she is.

She is, I think, one of the most remarkable naturalists now wandering around the Wisconsin countryside with her innovative day and night "Walks on the Wild Side" classes, offered through UW-Extension. She and her students walk all over the state, in all kinds of weather, and the experience is something you can't get out of books or pictures or Mutual of Omaha's "Wild Kingdom."

Marion points out the Indian pipes, the tree toads beneath your feet, the turkey vultures above your head. Every time we go, I feel like Lewis and Clark following Sacajawea.

I checked with her the other day to find out where she's walking next, and she said in the Wisconsin Dells on Oct. 9 through the 11th. Upham Woods. Blackhawk Island. Not only hiking, but canoeing, too. From 7 p.m. on Friday to 2 p.m. Sunday.

She calls the weekend outing "Spirit of the Land," and it's a far cry from the boat trips with the loudspeakers. Some folks will argue there is no spirit left in that land, but to go with Marion is to go with someone who speaks the language. And she writes it, too. This is part of a journal she kept this summer at Clair Lake in the Upper Peninsula—"out of Michigamme"—a truly wild place.

"The pathway to Clair Lake," she begins, "consumes us in maples, hemlocks, ferns and bunchberry. Aside from the tinkling of our 'bear bell,' there is not the breath of a sound.

"I am going 'home,' to the place of the loon, where I feel a strong affinity to the wild.

"Will the loons be there to greet me or will they have moved on—ever northward as man continues to invade the pristine wilderness?

"The rocky terrain keeps one's thoughts on the business at hand, for the packs are getting heavier with each step.

"Rocky outcrops foretell the nearness of our goal and through the pine boughs we catch a glimpse of the dark water.

"Moving the canoe into position for departure to The Island is an intrusion into the quiet, and we are promptly confronted by the loon, raising his voice to protest our coming.

"If he could only know my inner joy in finding him there!

"Coming closer, we are aware of his curiosity, his intense questioning of our presence here.

"Then we sight, in the distance, the female with her young. The male continues his surveillance and, satisfied that we intend no harm, joins his family across the lake.

"Our day has been long and night comes quickly. Here, one responds to the earth rhythms and so to bed with the sun.

"The night is filled with loon song bouncing off the ancient rocks, entering our very being, binding us to the land.

"What is it that strikes this primordial chord? What is it that gets us sensing the oneness and closeness, the feeling of wonder and mystery and perhaps, our spiritual ties to all fellow brethren of the universe?"

...

*This is the place of the loons
calling, mournfully, in the night.*

*Of the wind
singing, softly, in the pines.*

*Of blueberries
ripening in the summer sun.*

*Of trees
lining the shore like sentinels,
reaching for the sky.*

*Of hawks, circling overhead, their wings
catching uplift in the wind.*

*Of fish, jumping from another world
fathoms deep, dark, shared only
with the loons.*

*Of lichens
covering the rock with a tenacity
known only to them.*

And small ants finding their way.

Where are they going?

Where am I going?

*Are we all filling our niches in the
proper place and time? Will we meet
again in the place where we are One?*

...

"The loons allow me to share their lake. Their haunting calls arouse the kinship in me and bring me back to another time and place. Have I been a part of them in some distant past or do I imagine that such a thing could be? We are part of the same circle...."

...

"All true wisdom," Joan Halifax wrote in her book *Shamanic Voices*, "is only to be learned far from the dwellings of men, out in the great solitudes...."

She was quoting a Caribou Shaman called Igjugarjuk.

"To learn to see," he had said, "to learn to hear, you must do this—go into the wilderness alone. For it is not I who can teach you the ways of the Gods. Such things are learned only in solitude."

True, the Wisconsin Dells in October are a long way from the Yukon. But then, the Wisconsin Dells in October are also a long way from July. You could check it out by calling UW-Extension's Environment Resources: 262-1377.

Steady Eddy's considering it: The tourists are gone, the bugs are gone, and you can spend a weekend with the wisest woodswoman since the Seven-Foot Nun, who also knows all the Latin names for stuff.