NATURALIST'S CORNER

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Three Observations from a Morning Walk

I roll over in bed and adjust my eyes to see the alarm clock. It's 4 a.m. Time to get up and start my day. After a brief morning routine and a light breakfast, it's off to school. I could sleep in a bit longer, but a few years ago I added a walk to my morning routine. I stop about halfway to school and walk for about 20 minutes at the West Suffield Wildlife Management Area, right on the Connecticut-Massachusetts state line. This is a relaxing time which gives me a few minutes to prepare my thoughts for the energetic onslaught of middle school children. Besides the mindfulness aspect, my hikes have taught me a few things I would like to share with you.

First, Earth is tilted on its axis. Of course, we know this, at least intellectually. But have you seen the proof? I have. The walk I take is almost exactly along an east-west line, so in late September the sun rises straight ahead of me. On my walks in October and November, the sun rises a bit further and further to my right each morning as I walk eastward. The sun is moving across the sky from day to day. . .which of course we know is not correct. It is Earth's tilt that is causing the apparent change in the sun's location. Right around Christmas time, the sun's southern motion slows to a halt and eventually shifts northward. At first the change is slow, but it picks up speed, and by March the sun is again rising straight in front of me as I take my morning walk. Now it rises a bit to my left every day as it moves to its northern extent in late June, when my morning walks end for the season. Now, some sharp-eyed reader might be thinking, "If he sees the sun rise in September, he cannot be seeing a sunrise in December." You are absolutely right, but I can see some of my favorite planets. The planets follow the same path as the sun and can therefore be used to locate the morning sunrise point.

My second lesson is that cold air sinks. Again, you might know this intellectually, and perhaps if you happen to own an apple orchard you know this practically, but have you experienced the phenomenon? I have. This trail at the West Suffield Wildlife Management Area, a road really, undulates across a large open field. The parking lot is on a small rise and so I begin my stroll by dropping down into a small gulley. In the fall and again in the spring, the temperature change as I drop 20 feet downslope is very pronounced. During the night the air cools and becomes just slightly denser. This "heavier" air then settles into the low spots. In fall and spring, the sun is just coming up as I walk the trail and so the air has not had time to absorb the sun's energy; it remains cool, trapped in the hollow of the land. Interestingly, cold air can hold very little moisture, so on many mornings I walk from the parking lot into a bank of fog. The fog layer sits above this cooler area, so from the bottom of the hollow, I look up to see the layer of fog above me. As I climb out of the hole I cross through that layer, and later, when the trail dips again, I drop back through it and into another cold sink before eventually reaching the turnaround point of my hike. Again, I go in and out of the fog as I return to my car.

My third observation occurs only in the spring, as the birds return from the south. Different species of birds sing from perches of different heights. As winter breaks and the snow melts away from the trail, I look forward to the return of the songbirds. Sparrows always seem to be the first to return. The fields are barren and so they have few perches from which to sing. They tend to sit low to the ground and belt out their songs. At first, I thought that this was a result of a dearth of opportunity. Surely if there were tall plants, the sparrow would alight at the top and sing, but in the case of the chipping and white-throated sparrows this does not seem to be the case. Throughout the season, the sparrows always seem to sing from a low perch, often hidden from view when the grasses grow tall. Not the case for the meadowlark. I only find these birds singing from the highest, most open perches. The West Suffield property was an old farm and is being managed for upland game birds. There are a number of tall posts, 20 or more feet in height, scattered across the landscape. It is from these posts, and these alone, that the meadowlarks sing. They like to be up high before sharing their song. But the species that really got me to recognize this trend was the common yellowthroat. Like the sparrows, when they return the fields are barren, but yellowthroats find a perch 15 to 20 inches high from which to sing. As the grasses and forbs grow, they keep to that same height. In the early spring I have no trouble spotting these little warblers, but as the season progresses, they disappear below the growing grassland. They keep on singing even if now they cannot be seen. I should acknowledge that some birds, like the American robin and the tufted titmouse, do not seem to prefer any particular height for their singing. They might sing from the ground, from a short stump, or from a branch high in the trees.

My school year has just started again, and I look forward to my renewed walks. I have been walking this trail nearly every day during the school year, rain or shine. It never ceases to amaze me, how this simple little trail can change so much from day to day and season to season. I encourage you to find a trail that you can call your own and explore its moods and secrets over time.

~ Tom Condon