

NATURALLY: Listening to nature is good for the soul

- By Sara King Special to the Gazette
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I've often walked with people visiting White's Woods for the first time. Without exception, each one has commented that our woods are especially quiet.

One can rarely hear traffic noise or industrial sounds, or, thanks to the size of the forest, even the sounds of many people. The woods are free from the constant hum of humans.

It is this quiet, of course, that allows one to actually hear the forest. Last November, the fallen leaves were so deep and crisp that my feet moving through them made a racket that was nearly as loud as ocean waves. I had the chance to listen to that for an hour.

By December, large flocks of migrating birds had arrived in White's Woods. There was a flock of cedar waxwings, a huge flock of blackbirds, a few large gatherings of robins, and one big flock of smaller birds — maybe sparrows? — hundreds of birds, high in the treetops, that created a high-pitched concert of sweet, melodic song.

Sometimes, particularly in the summer when the birds are chattering especially loudly, it means that there is trouble of some sort somewhere. There is a hawk nearby. Or there is a bird just out of the nest and on the ground, and I need to watch where I walk to make sure that the baby is safe. Crows, on the other hand, just talk a lot, I think. I read that crows have a vocabulary of more than 250 different sounds.

A raven's knocking sound catches even the attention of my dog. Recently one morning, I heard the slow, pensive hoot of a great horned owl, which is an especially fine sound when the ridgetop, as it was that morning, is covered in mist.

Why is all of this forest sound so soothing? Poet Gary Snyder said that, “Nature is not a place to visit. It is home.” In his poem, *The Peace of Wild Things*, conservationist, essayist, and poet Wendell Berry explains that “for a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.”

The ruffed grouse startled me, as they surely meant to do, with a great flapping of their wings. The woodpeckers are loud. When they pick a nice, big, hollow tree, you can hear them working from over a half mile away.

But it is not just the birds that make such quickening sound.

Sometimes I hear the sound of water rushing into one of White’s Woods’ three streams. I hear deer bleat and chipmunks trill. And thanks mostly to the wind, I hear the mountain music of trees. The leaves whoosh or whisper or rustle and falling branches squeal or groan or pop.

I should be very happy whenever I am lucky enough to have an insect buzzing about my head. I’m working on it. We are in an insect “apocalypse.” The insect populations that provide the base of our food chain have dropped precipitously in the past few decades.

Even with all of this, I do believe that my favorite sound in the forest is the silence of a heavy snowfall in the midst of a winter storm.

We are seeing a new round of books that document the positive physical and spiritual effects of spending time in nature. Clemens Arvay’s 2018 book, “*The Biophilia Effect: A Scientific and Spiritual Exploration of the Healing Bond between Humans and Nature*,” provides an overview of the health effects of spending time in nature, including increased immune system activity and lower blood pressure. But Arvay also explains that humans have an innate bond with living things and that being in nature reminds us that we are part of the mysterious web of life.

There are many books that come at a person from every which way that detail the enrichment, complexity and importance of nature. Here are a few that are sorted by category that you might want to consider:

Nature and the human spirit: “*Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*” (Richard Louv, 2008); “*The Peace of Wild Things*” (Wendell Berry, 2018); “*Braiding Sweetgrass*” (Robin Wall Kimmerer, 2013); “*The Comfort of Crows: A Backyard Year*” (Margaret Renkl, 2023); “*Walden*” (Henry David Thoreau, 1854).

Trees and forests: “*The Overstory*” (Richard Powers, 2018); “*Entangled Life: How Fungi Make our Worlds, Change Our Minds, & Shape Our Futures*” (Merlin Sheldrake, 2020); “*Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest*” (Suzanne Simard, 2022); “*Treepedia: A Brief Compendium of Arboreal Lore*” (Joan Maloof, 2021); “*Old Growth: The Best Writing about Trees*” from *Orion Magazine* (2021).

Animals and sometimes humans, too: “*Beloved Beasts: Fighting for Life in an Age of Extinction*” (Michelle Nijhuis, 2021); “*Deer Man: Seven Years of Living in the Wild*” (Geoffroy

Delorme, 2022); “Bambi” (Felix Salten, 1923 — it was written for adults); “In the Company of Crows and Ravens” (John M. Marsluff, 2005).

Wildlife Mystery: “Winged Obsession: The Pursuit of the Most Notorious Butterfly Smuggler” (Jessica Speart, 2011);

To see more of this list — or to add to it — visit friendsofwhiteswoods.org.

The Naturally columns are brought to you each month by The Indiana Gazette and Friends of White’s Woods to showcase the wonders of nature in our area.