

# KING: White's Woods – A doorway to a new world

- By Sara King
- January 28, 2023 3 hrs ago



I'm charged with writing this inaugural column for a new, monthly feature in The Indiana Gazette. I'll start with some history.

One day last winter, the ice falling from the sky was so near-liquid that as it coated every tree limb, it froze with a row of hanging droplets. Even the tiniest stem held a series of perfectly clear, perfectly round ice balls that broke the light into spectrum. I walked one open-to-the-sky section of a White's Woods trail early the next morning and looked up to see a bright blue sky and every tree wrapped with hundreds of tiny shimmering rainbows.

I got to start my day in awe.

Some mornings when I walk in White's Woods, I am so inward that the best the forest can do is to let me settle into myself and feel alive. Many mornings the forest draws me into wonderment, and I see animals, plants, turtles, spider webs, birds and moths. I've seen baby red foxes and brilliantly-colored mushrooms. A great horned owl flew beside me along the Friends Trail not long ago. And I've had the good luck to have a mighty red-tailed hawk land just above my head more than a few times.

Three miles a day. Seven days a week. For 26 years.

I finally learned that the woods showcase different kinds of spider webs in different months and that ice freezes in different geometric patterns from puddle-to-puddle. I watch the spring and fall bird migrations. I'm astonished every year when the tree canopy arrives and am equally astonished when it drops.

When I am in our woods, that is, I am often taken at first with what “A Sand County Almanac” author Aldo Leopold called “the pretty.”

“Our ability to perceive beauty in nature, as in art, begins with the pretty,” Leopold said, but “it expands through successive stages of values as yet uncaptured by language.”

Suppose that there was no longer any “goose music,” Leopold wondered. No sound of whistling wings or honking or quacking. No chance to track a flock moving across the sky and imagine far-away lands and journeys. If we can live without goose music, Leopold said, “we might as well do away with the stars, or sunsets” or poetry and art.

But, though it takes time and curiosity to fully recognize the value of nature, the instinctive connection to nature exists in all human beings from the start.

Watch a baby — whose “hair will lift his hat,” Leopold says — when she or he first sees a wild animal. Our thrill at nature has no equivalence in the machine-made world. Nature holds our history and, despite the veil of assembly-line order at the local grocery stores, our sustenance. And it offers endless mystery.

“In all things of nature there is something of the marvelous,” Aristotle said.

“Between every two pines,” John Muir said, “there is a doorway to a new world.”

One of Leopold’s concerns in 1949, when “A Sand County Almanac” was first published, was that humans had so lost touch with the real value of nature that we put ourselves — and our land — at risk. Leopold believed that good science was important, but the folks he most worried about were the rest of us, the non-experts, who have a knowledge deficit about the natural world.

Why does skunk-cabbage hold so much “body-heat”? How on earth does a tufted titmouse collect fur from a live raccoon to line its nest? Why don’t monarch butterflies taste good to potential predators? How in the world do box turtles mate? How many species benefit from a groundhog’s tunneling?

How can we value nature, Leopold asked, if we never run across it and don’t learn about it?

I’m a nature “generalist.” Over the years, thanks much to the extraordinary passion about nature in people I’ve been lucky to meet, I’ve learned a bit about bird and tree identification, and some — though a bit less — about plants. As Leopold speculated, I was always captivated by mammals. I’ve learned some things about water. I’m finally learning to identify mushrooms.

Just in the past year I saw my first fisher. Only in the past few years have I begun to see our local coyotes.

I’ve also learned in the past few years that our region has at least its fair share of people who are passionate about learning about nature — specifically, about the nature right around us. We have

neighbors who have amazing knowledge of plants, birds, reptiles, amphibians, trees, fungi and more! They know about our woods.

Friends of White's Woods has asked that these neighbors share some of their knowledge with the rest of us in a monthly column for the *Indiana Gazette*. Occasionally, a column may be about what nature does for humans. Mostly, the columns will focus on nature itself.

When we learn about nature, Leopold said, we can understand that nature is a community to which we belong ... together.

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.