



INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, a writer for a men's magazine called me for help. He was putting together a fun piece on activities for fathers and sons, and he wanted to include ideas for nurturing nature at home. The information had to be manly enough for his editors, he cautioned, and planting for butterflies wouldn't cut it.

As I struggled to divide the natural world along stereotypical gender lines, I ticked off a few tips for projects that would be interesting, life-giving, and even helpful to butterflies, whether these hypermasculine magazine readers knew it or not. They could plant a bat garden with night-blooming flowers that feed moths. They could build a brush pile for snakes, frogs, birds, and turtles. They could make a mini meadow for fireflies and caterpillars.

We talked for forty-five minutes, but there was one thing I forgot. "Did you tell them about all the cool animals we see having sex in the yard?" my husband, Will, asked when he got home that night. Somehow, our wildlife peep shows had escaped my memory, and



To yucca moths, a single plant represents the entire universe. Caterpillars eat seeds, adults mate on flowers, and pupae overwinter in the soil below. Likewise, yucca plants (shown also on previous spread) can't live without yucca moths, their only pollinators.

maybe that's why my tips didn't make it into the article—a good thing, in retrospect, given how the editors chose to frame the story. “Be a Backyard Badass,” the headline screamed, and most of the piece was about humans going on the attack, with a subhead encouraging readers to blast rockets, fend off wild animals, and “raise a ruckus.” A section on the next page titled “Suburban Warfare” advised the audience to “tame backyard terrorists,” from aphids to raccoons to mountain lions.

The single-minded editors didn't just bury the lede; they missed it altogether. Your backyard—or deck or balcony or neighborhood green space—is sometimes a battleground; that much is true. But it's

not *your* battleground—or at least, it shouldn't be. When you treat it respectfully, here's what it could be: a place of endless growth and decay, birth and death, love and war, sweetness and light, lies and deceit and subterfuge. An epic tale of ancient cultures and storied family lines going back thousands of years. A safe haven of leaves and logs and snags for mothers and fathers raising their kids. A singles bar of ponds and perches for the lovelorn. A doctor's office of chemically fortified plants for the sick and wounded. A grocery store and a mixed-unit housing development of trees and shrubs and flowers for a diverse community of pollinators, predators, prey, decomposers, and other workers essential to a bustling economy.

Your outdoor surroundings are a vibrant universe, a place where many languages are spoken, sometimes in sensory alphabets we humans have hardly even begun to decipher. It's swirling with hidden messages: ephemeral molecules spelling out an invitation or piecing together a cry for help. Ultrasound clicks you can't hear and ultraviolet colors you can't see. Calls of alarm, distress, defense, and companionship that reach your ears but require a translator to decode.

If you treat the local environment like the homeland it's meant to be, you'll be exposed to more cultures and ideas and ways of life than if you visited with people from every country in the world. Butterflies will land on your toes, and fireflies will court on your knees. You'll cross paths with beetles who spend months raising their children, living together as families long after their young have hatched. You'll see hummingbirds make extraordinary swooping flights to impress their beloveds and mourning doves building their nests together. You'll watch a fox eating tidbits from the grass in the early morning sunlight and feel a rabbit hop over your shoe as the evening settles in. You'll

hear the anthems of frogs and bluebirds declaring the spring season, and you'll sit among hooting owls and shooting stars closing out the year in December.

You'll see that your yard and your community green spaces are not really yours at all, but the gathering place of countless sovereign nations, a refuge for the increasingly displaced. Faced with the blare and glare of extraneous human interference, many would-be habitats are stunted before they ever really get off the ground. Noise pollution, light pollution, lawns, and other negative by-products of superficial human progress are disrupting the connections among flora and fauna as well as our own ability to connect with the nature in our communities. But your space can be different, once you stop trying so hard to defend its borders and start looking at the world from the perspectives of other beings who live there.

Many books have been written about gardening for human senses, but our own sensory experiences are impoverished if we don't take the time to consider the sensory ecology of other species. Worse, the societal premium we place on our dominant sense—vision—leads us to suppress the habitats that animals and plants require. One of the many tragedies of the modern era is that the spaces where we live and work and play have been shoehorned into conformity, designed to be uniform and boring and flat for the sake of convenience and profit. What a great loss that is to us as participants in this world—in every sense: aesthetically, tactilely, aurally, olfactorily, and gustatorily. And what an even greater loss to all the other creatures who could thrive in more varied landscapes.

To understand their needs and how we're hindering their ability to survive, I started by trying to learn everything I could about my wild



This may look like your average insect tryst, but the story of blister beetles (told on page 136) is full of intrigue, involving thievery, weaponry, false identity, and fatal deception.

neighbors in my own habitat in Maryland. And when the pandemic hit, I never really left. I couldn't interview the plants and animals about their experiences, so I hit the books, read studies, and turned to nature's human interpreters. Sometimes I found the answers quickly. Other times my questions led to more questions. One inquiry even resulted in a collaboration with two overseas scientists. More often than not, I couldn't get exact answers about the behaviors or traits I was witnessing, but I could get approximate ones: best guesses based on knowledge of similar interactions among related species.

While in the process of reading hundreds of papers, interviewing dozens of scientists, and immersing myself in my habitat, I also tried honing my own senses. Like many Americans, I have poor

eyesight. I also have only half my hearing. But those obstacles pale in comparison with the electronic and gas-powered distractions and noise humans create, the false urgencies and expectations we adhere to. Many animals are specialized in their needs, but we are universal in our destruction. Our life spans are short, and our attention spans are even shorter. Our culture values “living in the moment,” but we’ve turned every moment into an exclamation point. Humans once planned their monuments for decades, sometimes centuries, in advance. They knew they’d never live to see the ripe fruits of their labors, just as they’d never live as long as the trees around them. Now we can build a house in a few weeks; stock it with furniture and toilet paper made from old-growth forests; sit inside, losing our long-distance vision in front of computer screens; and pay landscape crews to go deaf as they obliterate the outdoors.

When I started writing this book, the pandemic slowed down time. Then my father died, and I forgot what year it was for a while. I went from a sapling to a tree with more rings at my core, feeling the rain on my newly exposed roots as the ground eroded around me. But the roots still went deep, and the animals were still busy, keeping me company and planting new seeds in the shadows of my grief. Some appear here as recurring characters, competing with Will for my affections: Mr. Chippie and my green-frog boyfriend, the sassy wrens and hummingbirds. Other friendships, like those I made with a glamorous pink planthopper and the camouflaged looper caterpillars, were more fleeting. But they all took me on fascinating journeys, offering tiny windows into their sensory worlds.

Mark Twain famously said, “Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness.... Broad, wholesome, charitable views of

men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one’s lifetime.” A hundred fifty years later, I’m not sure I agree. Aside from the aspersions he casts on plants—what’s so bad about vegetating?—we now live in a time when many people don’t even know their human neighbors, much less their wild ones. Studies show that being around nature makes us smarter, happier, and kinder. Exploring in your own backyard can open up your imagination, and in the process, your humanity. I hope this book serves as inspiration for creating your own travel guide to your patch of the planet—and your own handbook of etiquette for respecting the many cultures crossing in and out of your borders every day.