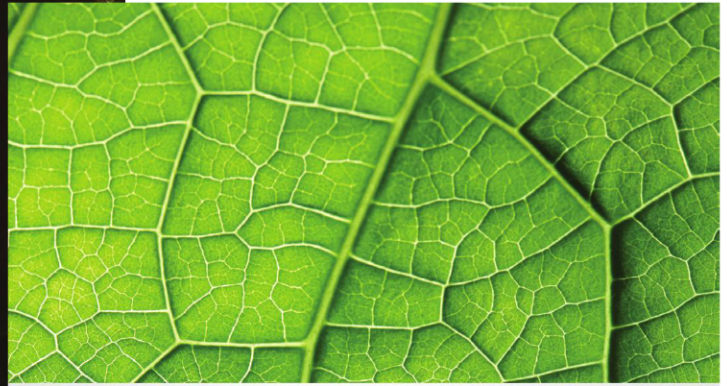




Observations from the trail

“When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world.”

— John Muir



The Book of Noticing

Collections and Connections on the Trail

KATHERINE HAUSWIRTH



Deep River resident and author Katherine Hauswirth has written a remarkable collection of essays, “The Book of Noticing: Collections and Connections on the Trail”. Hauswirth’s nature writing arises largely from long walks in Connecticut, and her observations demonstrate a spry curiosity and eloquent appreciation for our natural world. She guides the reader through her beloved landscapes with a steady hand.



Aspire proudly shares this excerpt:

For a while now, I've had the impulse to catalogue pine trees here in Deep River. I think this arose from a visit to our local Christmas tree farm, where someone had tacked boughs from all of the tree varieties to a board, captioning them with black magic marker labels: balsam fir, Fraser fir, blue spruce, Douglas Fir, white pine. Plus, the block I live on and the adjacent road are resplendent with what I have been calling tall "pines," and even my casual looks while walking by suggested to me great variety. At first I entertained the idea of setting out with scissors and snipping my own collection of boughs, but then I realized that I could simply snap some close-ups with my phone, avoiding harm to the trees and odd looks from the neighbors.

I soon realized that I was using the term "pine" the way an amateur birder uses the term "sparrow," when in fact there are at least 33 sparrow varieties in the United States alone. I learned about a term that even experienced birders use when they see some sparrow or warbler, wren or finch that defies precise description—: "a little brown job."

When considering my piney surroundings, which at first seemed to consist of all "big green jobs," I realized that there were spruces and firs to consider, too. Spruces, firs, and pines are all conifers. All produce cones (so they are not all, technically, pine cones!). But pine tree needles are attached in clusters of 2 or more, while with spruces

and firs the needles are attached individually — not too dissimilar from how people hang tinsel on their Christmas trees, in clumps, or neatly strand by strand.

My investigation yielded a Northern white cedar, a baby Eastern larch (aka tamarack), an Eastern hemlock, a Norway spruce, and a juniper. I learned more details as I went.

I learned about spittle bugs, who adorned the lower branches of my "Christmas trees." I was astounded to learn that there are more than 23,000 varieties of these mostly unseen creatures, who as nymphs secrete a frothy liquid disguise that also keeps them hydrated. And somehow, I had never made the connection that many birds, as well as squirrels, eat seeds from conifer cones. Studies have proven coevolution at work between the birds and squirrels and their cone breakfasts — the cones have adapted defenses over time so that in areas with mainly bird predators, the cones have thicker scales, while in areas dominated by squirrels the cones are heavier. Research shows geographic differences between crossbills, according to the local pine cone population: birds in areas with thicker cones have deeper, less curved bills.

As I was learning about the conifers I received a salvo of letters from The Nature Conservancy proclaiming: "Red Spruce Forests Need You, Katherine!" In Central Appalachia, almost a century after "The Great Cut" - clear-cutting that left only 5% of the red spruce forests intact - the Conservancy has set a goal of restoring the

spruces so that creatures including saw-whet owls, West Virginia Northern flying squirrels, and Cheat Mountain salamanders have a safe and life-sustaining habitat. If I were to hop onto the Appalachian Trail here in Connecticut and foot it down to Maryland or West Virginia, I'd walk right into the landscape...

All of my "pining" gives me a new sympathy for a relatively remote swath of our nation bereft of its red spruce. I am taken with the steadfastness and variety of the conifers in my area, and happy to think of them sheltering a host of creatures, many of whom I may never spot behind the thick branches. I have good frames of reference for the creatures the Central Appalachian red spruces host, too. I recall the vastly adorable but overly-fertile flying squirrels that were our upstairs attic neighbors for years, and the legions of salamanders that carried on their orange parades in many forests that I have loved. Ever since reading Central Park in the Dark I feel an intense need to find a sleeping saw-whet owl with my binoculars, a challenge because they are painted with perfect camouflage. I know they are there — I have heard them!

I've relished my micro-expedition into the pines (okay, conifers — it's going to take some time to warm to the more technically correct but less audibly pleasing term). Another explorer, Sebastian Copeland, whose expeditions have been anything but micro, said "we will not save what we do not love," and that rings true when I think about the conifers around my neighborhood and the drastically thinned red spruces farther south. For years I have felt an instinctive pull toward the prolific, fragrant needles of evergreens, but this instinct seems to have deepened into love, a love that grew because I stopped to look at them, really look at them quite closely, and to learn more about their quiet, purposeful lives.

This autumn the pollinated female cones of the Norway spruce in my yard will become fully mature, ready to spread their progeny. There's a bench just below, and I'm looking forward to sitting, watching, and waiting, leaning back and gazing into the tangle of brown and green, wondering where and when they might take root.



Katherine Hauswirth has been published in The Christian Science Monitor, The Day, Orion online, Whole Life Times, Connecticut Woodlands, and many other forums. Her blog, First Person Naturalist, is a reflection on experiencing and learning about nature. Katherine's writing has been awarded with artist residencies at Trail Wood (Connecticut Audubon's Edwin Way Teale memorial sanctuary) and Acadia National Park in Maine. A native New Yorker, she moved to the Connecticut River Valley 20 years ago. She is increasingly enamored of her adopted hometown, Deep River, where she lives with her husband and son. Preorders of "The Book of Noticing" can be made via homeboundpublications.com/store/books/book-of-noticing/ and will be available online and at bookstores in May 2017.



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