

Katherine Hauswirth  
**The Marsh Hen**

The ranger from Acadia National Park in Maine called at the end of a weary April workday. She invited me to be a writer in residence for two weeks. I would be surrounded by salt water—residing on the Schoodic Peninsula, which juts into the Atlantic Ocean's Gulf of Maine. I was buoyed by excitement that would carry me through to the long-awaited day of departure the following June. As the summer approached, I thought back on my friendship with the Atlantic, which started well before the lifeguard on his stand at Long Island's Jones Beach held my wriggling toddler body high above the crowd, so Mom could retrieve me from my wanderings.

Because Mom was a teacher the summer was entirely ours—a breezy, sleepy stretch of collecting shells, digging for crabs, and watching the gulls dive into the heavy metal waste baskets dotting crowded Field 5. I sat in the shallow water just yards beyond the dry sand, letting the water rock me. I brought home sizeable portions of the beach in the bottom of my bathing suit, laced with ribbons of seaweed and tiny pebbles.

At the beach I entered my own, insulated soul space, despite the animated conversations all around me. My senses took in the salt-infused air, the shimmering, pale orange shells near the tide line, the grains of sand that made their way onto my tongue. When I stood still and looked at my feet as the waves receded, I was mesmerized by the illusion that I, too, was moving.

Those waves went on forever. I turned to the right, then to the left, finding that the coast, too, reached into the unseeable distance. Long Island is aptly named.

When I moved to Connecticut with my husband, my sisterhood with the ocean took on a new feel. Our main connection to the Atlantic was via the nearby tidal estuary that is the Long Island Sound—a

calmer and more contained part of her personality. But often even the Sound was hard to get to, with the day-to-day demands of work and family life keeping me farther inland. When I had some extra time, I would take River Road home from work and watch the red-winged blackbirds at Pratt Cove, a freshwater tidal marsh closer to home. I thought about how the Cove's water, though mostly bereft of salt, reflected its parent sea in its daily ebbs and flows.

My reunion with the Atlantic at Acadia felt like coming home, albeit to a less familiar and more dramatic display of her waters. I wrote about the pervasive smell of the surf, and about hearing the waves when I came out my door in the morning. The first morning's early walk to the Point started a daily ritual of watching the shifting rhythms and colors of the Gulf before breakfast.

I watched the gulls watching over the coast and looking profound. They were, alternately, obnoxiously loud and quietly stoic. I pulled my glasses off at regular intervals to wipe away a thick coat of mist. The rest of me was soaked, too, chilly even in June. I zipped my sweatshirt and warmed as I walked toward the rising sun.

The boundary between land and sea kept calling for my attention, but after a time I began to take in my more immediate surroundings. The crevices between the broad, flat rocks—those set back a bit from the surf—housed a multitude of funnel spider webs that took on a jeweled appearance in the saturated air. I wondered if each spider set up single or multiple webs, and what the odds were of their catching anything. I had fun making some of the insects enormous with my binoculars.

Lichens were everywhere, in seemingly every color. At a talk by Tom Wessels, who wrote *Granite, Fire, and Fog: The Natural and Cultural History of Acadia*, I learned that each droplet of fog—so ubiquitous on many days at the park—has a thousand times more nutrients in it than does a droplet of rain. So lichens grow comparatively quickly in this corner of the world. One of the first things I had noticed after

the craggy largesse of the landscape were the Old Man's Beard lichens festooning so many of the trees. And on those trees the red squirrels held court, much bolder and chattier than their grey cousins in Connecticut. They were curious about me and perpetually stirred up, peering down and pontificating as I squinted up and snapped photos.

A ranger told me about a lesser-known spot, where a jetty jutted out into a calmer inlet away from the Point. The stones there were relatively small and rounded, hosting a spectrum of color. When I walked over them, they made satisfying music. The mollusk shells scattered among them were an Easter egg purple, and snails clung everywhere, sporting their perfect spirals and their own assortment of subtler hues.

In equal measure with the roaring ocean, I treasured the smaller, smoother bodies of water dotting the Peninsula and the adjacent environs, the marshes and mud flats I found along the roads to Mount Desert Island. I liked to count the snails on the large rocks and watch birds glide in at dusk, ruffling the water. I had a scrubbed and airy feeling on this part of the continent and its islands, a baptismal sensation that quenched some thirsty part of me. Near the ocean, I felt washed clean. At the quieter inlets I felt soothed and still.

During the first walk I took on Mount Desert Island, on a day marked by mist that obscured the opposite shore of Jordan Pond, a woman passing me on the trail exclaimed, "Everyone looks so happy!" I instantly understood and mostly agreed, although I chose a different adjective: illuminated. People seemed to light up at Acadia. Was this a phenomenon wrought by coast and climate, by proximity to wind-sculpted trees, the lively Gulf, and the sense of traveling an expertly rendered, living watercolor?

Or was I projecting the happy light of my quiet adventure onto passersby? I was living a relatively monastic existence and enjoying the freedom of it. I ate alone, slept alone, and rarely spoke. I walked and thought and wrote for long stretches, losing my sense of time. I

prayed. I relished doing these things as the spirit moved me, but I also found that I experienced people in a new way when our paths did cross. Along the Jordan Pond Path, I was surprised to find that I noticed how people *smelled*. I picked up scents of bug spray, coconut oil, shampoo, and cigarettes from various fellow walkers. I don't have an especially astute nose, normally, so I am not sure if it was my isolated days that somehow magnified this ability. Or could it have been a function of the wet air? Whatever the cause, I welcomed these surprising and intimate scents. They surrounded their owners like auras, preceding their arrivals with little hints about how their days had started.

People were so very kind along the trails. On that Jordan Pond walk, many of the interesting-smelling walkers passing from the opposite direction had words of advice and encouragement—about how the bog walk boards were slippery after the detour, or how much longer it was until the next intersection. Folks often stepped aside to allow passage of others in narrow spots. And those behind me never seemed to be in a rush (or, if they were, they remained quite silent about my slow going). I had the unexpected and pleasing sense that we were all in this together.

I had hoped to see some seals in the water or on the rocks with my binoculars at the Point, but I mostly got close-ups of the gulls, and the random loon or cormorant. The mercurial clouds and fog and expanses of waterside stone all spelled a compelling and photogenic scene, but what day-to-day life was happening out past the boulders and crashing foam? To learn more, I stopped at the Oceanarium—which promised a touch tank, a lobster hatchery, a lobster museum, and a salt marsh—on my way back from Mount Desert Island to my Peninsula apartment.

I bought a ticket for the tour but had missed the final marsh walk for the day. At the touch tank, an older woman with a lined face and dark, lively eyes plunged her arms into the water and came up with



samples of ocean life that riveted the audience. Although she sounded quite expert, it seemed these creatures continued to amaze her, too. Her eyes widened as she explained how the sea cucumber spills its intestines like spaghetti when threatened, and sucks them back in later. And how the sea star has a sort of eye at the tip of each ray. Moon snails drill holes in clams to get at the meat (this explained the necklace-ready shells I had gathered as a child), and sand dollars eat sand (well, the bacteria on it), along with other infinitesimal things. While our teacher wrapped up her talk and directed us towards the museum next door, I pondered a large sign about God and his many creatures on the wall above her shoulder. In the museum, the owner David brought a lobster around to show us the fine, perfect line that ran down its back, which would someday soften so the creature could grow and shed its old carapace. We took turns fingering the smooth crease.

At the end of the talk, I inquired about coming back for a marsh walk on another day. With a wave of her hand, David's wife Audrey sent me back to take my own, self-guided tour. The marsh was quiet and still, subdued tans, greens, and browns awash in light from the descending sun. I took a few photos: the distant stretch of water, from an overlook; a little sign about conifer reproduction; an impressively large, flat, yellow mushroom hosting a hungry bug; and several feathers I found on the walkway. Placed amidst these artifacts were words that, together with the poster at the touch tank, quietly underlined the Oceanarium family's life of faith. One sign had words from Saint Francis, praising God for earth, fruits, flowers, colors, and grass. Inside a little box with a peep hole circling the marsh, someone had posted part of The Marshes of Glynn poem by Sidney Lanier. The mix of exultant and earthy language drew me:

*...As the marsh-hen secretly builds on the watery sod,*

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*Behold I will build me a nest on the greatness of God:  
I will fly in the greatness of God as the marsh-hen flies  
In the freedom that fills all the space 'twixt the marsh and the skies:  
By so many roots as the marsh-grass sends in the sod  
I will heartily lay me a-hold on the greatness of God...*

Later, I learned that marsh hens are also known as American Rails. *The Classic Collection of North American Birds* told me that these birds prefer dense marsh and are thus hard to access. They are active in the evening, feeding into the night and migrating under cover of darkness. The book described them as secretive birds, "most often heard and hardly ever seen." I wondered if Lanier had gone deep into the reeds to observe these creatures, or if he'd barely glimpsed them and was intrigued by their mysterious goings-on.

When I walked back past the tall grasses I found the Oceanarium owners and employees relaxing at the end of their workday, lounging by the gift shop counter. They were kind and inquisitive, and before long David gently reintroduced the messages I'd noticed on their signs, floating the topic of faith. I politely sidestepped the conversation, wanting to hold close and quiet all that the marsh and the poem, Acadia and its visitors had opened in me. I thought about the water—Long Island's stretch of the Atlantic, the Connecticut side of the Sound, Schoodic's brisk surf, Mount Desert Island's glacial tarn, the marshes here and back at home. I thought of the countless and sometimes nameless tributaries – so many of which I would never see – in vast networks connecting it all. A light rain started to punch holes in the dust on the windshield. I drove back to the Peninsula with all the windows open, singing softly. ♦

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