Peace amid a pandemic



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By Nate Smelle

Valuing nature requires the commitment of experiencing it firsthand. Walking the Heritage Trail the other day, watching the snow melt into the widening puddles, I noticed a scrum of hoof-prints just past a sign pointing the way to McArthurs Mills. Moving in closer to get a better look, I could see that one set of prints appeared to be headed in a different direction than the rest of the herd.Tightening my bootstraps in an attempt to avoid getting my feet wet, I stepped off the trail and into the forest to follow in the hoof-steps of this solitary animal. With only a scattering of snow patches still decorating the forest floor, tracking this mysterious creature through the wilds of North Hastings proved to be no easy task. However, it was only because I could not rely on the tracks alone that I eventually wound up tracing this path to its source.Reaching an opening in the forest, the hoof-prints I had been following for the past hour or so suddenly disappeared into the absence of snow. Scanning the area for any signs of life I ?luckily? stumbled toe-first into a pile of steaming brown gold (aka elk scat). Realizing in that moment I was not alone in my exploration of social distancing, I slipped gently back into the greenery to take a look at the big picture and listen in on the story it was telling.Crouching along the forest's edge I caught sight of a pair of American Robins darting from tree to tree, and calling out to one another. Pounding away on a standing dead tree still full of life, a pileated woodpecker carved into the wood in search of survival. Overhead, the honking of a small flock of Canadian geese called my gaze skyward to watch as they signaled their return to North Hastings after a 3,000 to 5,000 kilometre flight that didn't require a single drop of gasoline.By the way the sunlight illuminated their wings I could see that the angle of the sun was changing. In that same moment of silent realization, my ears picked up the sound of something massive, stepping carefully through the forest behind me. Turning my head slowly, in order not to give away my location, my heart jumped from my chest as I found myself staring face to face with the individual responsible for inspiring my adventure.There before me, standing close to seven feet tall from hoof to crown was a shaggy looking elk, picking his teeth with the branches of a balsam fir.As quietly as possible, I watched as he cautiously maneuvered his way through the trees. Making eye contact for a moment we acknowledged each others' presence and then carried on with our business.On the long walk home I thought about how originally I had planned to find a good sitting rock upon which I could go over my notes from a daily press briefing regarding the extent of the pandemic's spread in Ontario. Feeling grateful for the spontaneous redirection provided by my new friend, I silently thanked the elk for helping me postpone this depressing endeavour ? and for the moments of peace we had shared amid the pandemic.