Appreciating a closer look



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By Nate Smelle

?Good walking leaves no track behind it,? once wrote the Chinese philosopher sage Lao Tzu.Standing in the rain, turning over the soil in my garden the other day, I spotted my first northern flicker of the season. Upon seeing this familiar streak of gold and red flash before my eyes I was reminded of the feeling of excitement and joy I experience every year at this time when our two species cross paths. Recalling how last year I had been standing in almost the exact same spot, doing almost the exact same thing, I was also reminded of how that same evening the year before I heard the spring peepers singing their first song of the season.Turning over my last shovel of soil for the day I noticed that the light spring shower keeping me cool had passed. As I walked back to the shed to put away my tools, like clockwork there they were ? the first spring peepers of 2020.Over the years, keeping track of these sort of timely seasonal reminders has become somewhat of a hobby for me. Through this pass-time of passive observation I have developed a sense of place within my home ecosystem, and in turn a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness between all living things.As a wildlife photographer, I have been keeping an eye on our non-human neighbours for almost two decades. However, it was not until my first spring after moving to North Hastings in December of 2006 that I truly began paying close attention to the timeliness of nature's comings and goings.Although at that time I did spend an equally significant amount of time in nature, the primary objective of my wanderings was to seek out and capture the nature's beauty with my camera. The inspiration for sharpening my focus that spring came from a book I read over the winter by world-renowned biologist Edward O. Wilson called The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth.By means of his book, Wilson ? aka the ?father of biodiversity? ? introduced me to a method of studying an ecosystem called a ?BioBlitz.? Basically, a BioBlitz is an intense period of biological surveying that takes place in a designated area.Initially when these types of surveys began in 1996 they were conducted by teams of government scientists from the U.S. National Park Service. Since then, Wilson pointed out that on many occasions they are now communally organized events that bring together all facets of society from experienced naturalists to first-time nature-enthusiasts.What I found most inspirational about Wilson's take on the BioBlitz was how he noted that they could be done anywhere, at any time, by anyone. Whether enjoying time in nature on your own, with a friend, or with a team of scientists, by simply keeping track of the living species one encounters on their journey, we all have the opportunity to improve our understanding of the world we live in. As Wilson suggests, it is through this expanded understanding of the natural world we are a part of, that we learn to appreciate and care for all living things and the earth we share.?Humanity is part of nature, a species that evolved among other species,? explains Wilson.?The more closely we identify ourselves with the rest of life, the more quickly we will be able to discover the sources of human sensibility and acquire the knowledge on which an enduring ethic, a sense of preferred direction, can be built.?Staring into the unknown future ahead,

wondering what the ?new normal? will look like once the pandemic becomes a page in some yet unwritten history book, we find ourselves in a position of privilege. With this extra time on our hands courtesy of COVID-19, there are ample opportunities every day for all of us to appreciate nature more keenly. In doing so, we might just discover a part of ourselves that is worth protecting as we reshape society and the path forward.