

Deer trail adventures



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By Nate Smelle

Thinking about how Home Again dog foster Dannielle Dudgeon mentioned that the dogs she and her husband have cared for inspired them to get outdoors more, I put on my thickest jacket and headed for the hills. Crunching through the crust of the fresh snow as I trudged through the frozen landscape, I realized how my winter hikes had become rarer since my two dogs Pal and Dudley crossed over a few years back.

For most of these expeditions we would hit the trails without a destination in mind. Usually one of the dogs would pick up a scent and I would simply tag along for the ride. Without the boys leading the way, I followed the Heritage Trail along Landon Road until I spotted a pair of white-tailed deer in the distance that appeared to be on their way to the Bronson Marsh. Spying me at almost the same time they caught my eye, they kicked up their hooves and vanished into the brush before I could lift my camera from my coat. Tracking them through the forest, I soon came to the conclusion that it was a lost cause when I found myself in the middle of a circle of hoofprints sprawling out in all directions.

Enjoying the peacefulness of the moment, I allowed the lack of distractions from the relative silence open my eyes a little further. While sitting on a snow-covered log scanning the horizon and the shadows for movement, I started counting the several species of trees within the realm of my sight. Surrounding me was a blend of eastern white cedar, balsam fir, sugar and red maple, white birch, and a variety of spruce and poplar. Tightening my focus in on the bark of these seemingly sleeping giants towering over me, I could see signs of life decorating them as they swayed gently in the breeze.

Suddenly, the illusion of silence I had been appreciating disappeared when a freezing cold winter wind whipped the canopy into a frenzy, causing the forest to release a symphony of snaps, crackles and pops. Keeping an eye out for any dangerous looking limbs overhead, I ducked under the thick stem of a fallen tree wedged securely between two of the strongest maples nearby.

As the stillness returned, so did the songs of the birds that had previously been silently waiting out the wind. Though yes, many species have flown south for the winter, from the orchestra of sound that emerged out of the silence, there was still obviously an abundance of winged-ones residing in North Hastings. Loudly pecking away at a massive sugar maple behind me there was a hairy woodpecker in search of a snack. Climbing up and down another tree beside me, a red-breasted nuthatch softly picked insects from beneath its shedding bark. To the east, a blue jay shrieked persistently as a raven cawed its response.

With the day's light quickly disappearing, I decided to head home. Following the deer's tracks as they weaved through the forest, I made it back on the Heritage Trail just as the sun dipped out of sight. Warming by the fire later that night, I thought of how many deer trails I had followed with my friends Pal and Dudley over the years, and how much I still cherish these memories.