

The Living Forest



By Nate Smelle

OVER THE WEEKEND I HAD the chance to put on an old hat I once wore as a canopy tour guide at the Haliburton Forest and Wildlife Reserve. Having been two years since I last wandered through the tree tops I was curious to see how this once familiar path had evolved. In the five seasons I spent working as a guide at the forest I was astounded to learn just how alive the forest truly is. Observing the forest from such an elevated perspective on a day-to-day basis it becomes easier to see how frequently the forest transforms itself. When fully present to your surroundings at this level the number of changes taking place from one moment to the next are countless.

The first time people step off of the cliff and onto the canopy tour it is difficult for them to fully recognize the richness of the beauty that is immediately overloading their senses. The more time one spends in this seldom visited layer of the forest, the more clear this realization of the forest as a living organism becomes. It is this heightened familiarity with the forest is what I recognized as the greatest privilege of working as a canopy tour guide.

Unavoidably grabbing the guest's attention at the start of the tour is the bird's eye view. As the canopy walker emerges into the landscape further their focus shifts from the scenic highlands in the distance to the details directly in front, behind, beside, below and above them. Complimenting the aesthetic is a wide diversity of birds, butterflies and other canopy dwellers comfortably gliding, fluttering and leaping from limb to limb as they go about their daily routine.

After 100 plus trips into the canopy I became somewhat accustomed to such spectacular sights while on tour. It was at this time that I started to focus my attention on the sounds and scents of the forest. When suspended 30 to 70 feet above ground among the leaves, nests and needles, every breath of wind seems to awaken a new fragrance from the forest; every drop of rain harmoniously adding another beat to nature's symphony.

Building a fire in the sand as the sun sank into Little Black Lake after this weekend's tours, I thought back to another time I experienced the wild acoustics of the Haliburton Forest at this location. Following a full day of mountain biking through the backcountry with a group of 20 Grade 8 students from a private school in Toronto, I met up with fellow canopy tour guide and outdoor educator Cameron Ferguson and his group of students for an evening of enlightenment around the campfire. Before lighting the fire and after the sun went down, Ferguson engaged the class with an activity he simply called a "night sit." Encouraging participants to step outside of their usual comfort zone the exercise was also designed to help steer the fireside conversation in a more educational direction. Not an easy task with kids of this age, yet somehow the "night sit" worked wonders in provoking insightful dialogue.

In complete darkness, Ferguson, the teachers and I lined the students up and silently walked with them into the forest; dropping each

student off one by one along the trail to discover their own appreciation of the forest at night. Without the comfort of the artificially illuminated urban setting of the Greater Toronto Area that most of these individuals call home, many of them described the experience as frightening in the beginning and enlightening in the end. Afterwards, both the students and teachers who participated in the activity reflected on how their experience of being immersed in the illusion of solitude created by the 'night sit' had inspired them to see the world in a different way than they did before. The sounds of the nightlife in the forest that had previously gone unnoticed by the majority of them seemed to awaken the group to a bigger picture of existence.

Putting down my pen just after 1 a.m. I noticed that the fire had gone out while I was writing. Shifting my focus from the candlelit page to the sounds suddenly emerging from the forest around me, I realized that I was in the middle of my own 'night sit.'

From across the water a pack of wolves howl out a lullaby, frightening and enlightening me while I drift off to sleep.