



MISSISSIPPI MADAWASKA LAND TRUST CONSERVANCY

Official Newsletter

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TRIBUTE TO THE BLUE JAY

By Howard Clifford

It is interesting how newness brings fascination, familiarity brings contempt, and a new look brings respect. Growing up in Edmonton, Magpies were dime a dozen. Although never contemptuous of them, I gave them scant notice. On the other hand Barrie, who is the lead birder in our family, was so excited on a visit to Edmonton when he saw a Magpie that he asked his amused uncle to stop the car to enable a closer look.

My story is reversed. Moving to Ontario I became fascinated by the beautiful, saucy, magnificently crested Blue Jay. However years later I was no longer pleased when they came to our feeders. What pigs! Scattering seeds all over! I still liked them but felt I couldn't afford their raids on our feeders. Familiarity reduced my fascination.

But I was not as familiar with them as I thought. What were all those strange noises I heard in the woods? What an amazing repertoire they have – from a melodious gurgling to the sound of a squeaking rusty gate. Occasionally when bush-wacking I heard their distant alarm call. Was I their presumed predator or were they picking up an intrusion beyond the abilities of my senses?

If me - why? Surely they knew me. I often observed them eyeing me close-up and attentive as chickadees landed on my hand to obtain a seed. Never did they try to do the same. Why? Was it that they could take more at a time from the feeder than from my hand or was their natural caution so deeply ingrained in their DNA they didn't dare to test my sincerity? Yet their caution was of a different order from other animals who do their best to escape human attention. They seemed self-assured - even cocky - allowing me to be reasonably close but never too close.

Jays, along with Ravens, Crows, and Magpies are part of the Corvidae family, known for their highly developed intelligence. Given the personality of the Jay, I wonder if aboriginal communities also include them alongside the Raven as a "trickster" in their wonderful revealing myths. Jays are able to mimic the vocalizations of squirrels and hawks and even man made machinery. One neighbor told me that his father was once shaken by being repeatedly called by name while walking in the woods, with no one in sight. Eventually, to his relief, the culprit proved to be a Blue Jay. I wonder how many times I have been tricked by the Jay into thinking I had heard a hawk or another animal?

Nancy Hugo states in her book "Seeing Trees" that Jays, due to their role in forest regeneration, are called the "avian Johnny



Appleseed". In one study Jays, with their expandable esophagus, were seen to fit up to three white oak acorns, five pin oak, or fourteen beechnuts in their throat at a time. Over the course of 28 days, fifty banded Jays transported 150,000 acorns to new sites, some sites being more than two miles away. What a remarkable forester! What not to love?

Others have observed their important role in pest control by destroying cocoons and eating the pupae of tent caterpillars and other insects. Some claim they save the lives of small birds, such as my good friend, the chickadee, because hawks bypass the small birds at the feeder in order to obtain the larger meal - the Jay.

Several times a year I find nothing left but a pile of Blue Jay feathers giving evidence that in spite of their intelligence and cautionary behavior, they too fall victim to predators - the ongoing saga of Nature keeping things in balance. Yes, I have come full circle in my appreciation of the Blue Jay. They, like the chickadee, keep me company during the winter months.

AWARD FOR PETER FISCHL

On November 24, 2012, Certificates of Appreciation were presented to Peter Fischl, Erik Kafrissen, Glenn Drover, and Barbara Gibson at the Wild Food Dinner fund-raiser for MMLTC.

This is only the second time that MMLTC has presented these awards reserved for those "individuals who have contributed in: Connecting People to NATURE, Valuing NATURE, and Protecting NATURE." In keeping with the fact that MMLTC does not take the giving of these awards lightly, I plan to pay tribute, starting with Peter, one recipient in each of the upcoming newsletters.

A standing joke between Peter and I was "We will see each other next pay day at Mary's Nature Lovers' Bookshop." Peter had an insatiable desire to learn as much as he could about Nature. I have lost count of the number of hours we spent together on nature walks at cliffLAND where we shared pertinent information and thoughts. His primary interest was edible and medicinal plants. We shared the belief that with the right knowledge no one should ever have to starve in any season in the Canadian wilds. Of course his interest went far beyond how Nature might sustain our physical bodies. Large, old, primaeval trees held a special attraction for him and led to identifying and photographing these trees throughout Lanark County. In fact one of his visits to cliffLAND was occasioned by his wish to see our old cedar for himself. A visit we both enjoyed and this grandfather cedar kindled in each of us the respect and awe that only such a visit with venerable fellow species can do.



I was a little surprised about a year ago, but now in hindsight realize it was a natural progression for Peter, to be invited along with a few others to a meeting to discuss the feasibility of starting a foraging club. The rest is history! Who would have predicted that in less than a year the Lanark Wild Food Club would have over 80 members and would cap off the year with an extraordinarily successful Wild Food Dinner as described by Hilary in our last newsletter.

Peter insists that the club's success was the result of a team effort. A team effort it certainly was! But it was Peter's idea and he was our unquestioned choice to be the President. I suspect there were at least four factors that led to the club's success. One cannot downplay Peter's leadership, the countless hours he put into it nor the initiatives he took to keep things moving ahead. Equally important was the enthusiastic and complimentary skills characterizing the team he put together. The club tapped into a hunger by people to be connected with Nature in a real, practical, hands-on experience. Lastly was the inclusiveness of the club's approach. Old and young, neophytes and life-long devotees, naturalists, birders, photographers, hunters, anglers, foresters - all welcomed - all respected. Consequently friendships were cemented beyond the ordinary circle of friends and perspectives were enlarged.

From the beginning Peter and I intuitively knew that foraging activities were a wonderful match for MMLTC. We became partnership organizations! Each property MMLTC is responsible to protect lends itself to the foraging activities of the club. A partnership that I think both Peter and I are very proud. Although we have not spent a lot of time talking about it - we didn't have to - some things you just know. One thing we share is the conviction that Nature not only can provide high quality nourishment for our physical well-being but also nourishes our emotional life, enriches our mental health, and profoundly feeds our souls. We are both convinced that the more we come to know nature in all its various aspects the better foragers we can become.

I am proud to call Peter a kindred spirit - a good friend and I'm honoured to pay tribute to him as one of MMLTC's recipient of the Certificate of Appreciation award.

MMLTC Receives Trillium Grant

MMLTC is delighted to be receiving from the Ontario Trillium Foundation \$74,800 for a two year Capacity Building project. The land trust has been growing quickly and this funding will strengthen the competence of the Board and the organization.

The program will build capacity in four key areas: long term financial stability through enhanced fundraising; partnership development related to use of the lands under MMLTC protection; improved communications and outreach; and the establishment of a volunteer management program.

Experts will be contracted to provide skilled staff resources and to work with the MMLTC Board members, other volunteers and part-time staff, not only to achieve the project goals, but more importantly to transfer critical skills to the organization.

To become involved in this important phase of our development, please contact Mary at 613-278-2939 or vandenhoff@bell.net.