

Pond, Swamp and Woodland

By Gloria Hildebrandt

I've been given 14 acres of land near the Niagara Escarpment as part of my share of an inheritance from my father. He had discussed this with me, so it was no surprise, and I was — am — delighted to have the land. I've known it since I was eight years old, and, after moving to Toronto to go to university and work as a freelance writer, I moved back in 1992 to a house I had built on a corner of that land. So I've known this land well for most of my life, in all weather, through all seasons. I liked how my father kept it natural, but maintained trails and boardwalks to give access to all its parts and corners.

It's a relatively small piece of land except that it is immensely varied, with different habitats and ecosystems within it. There are moss-covered areas of Escarpment limestone outcroppings. There's a dense cedar forest on the edge of a swamp. There's a spring-fed pond big enough to swim in and even paddle a canoe for a few strokes. A bench in my father's memory now sits on the bank of the pond. There are seasonal streams that flow through the back of the property during spring run-off. There's hardwood forest. There's a hill with a view of the length of the property from the road almost to the back fenceline, where my mother used to enjoy sitting. Now there's a bench there with her name on it. I'm thinking about getting a bench made with my name on it, so that I can enjoy it while alive.

Maintenance

Not a lot of land, but a varied property with a lot of areas to explore, observe and maintain.

Trails have to be maintained by tractor mower. Tree



▲ The pond as it was when my father was alive. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.

branches have to be clipped back. Bridges and boardwalk slats have to be kept safe. Dead trees have to be cleared out of the way of fences, paths, and kept from damaging other trees. Unwanted trees need to be cut down, and desirable trees need to have competing trees thinned out.

A lot of work, my father said.

I have a lot of help from my partner Mike. And for my last birthday, he gave me a battery-powered chainsaw, because I'm scared of regular chainsaws. They're hard to start, need fussy oil measurements, and are heavy because you're lifting the fuel when you use it. Phooey. But a battery-powered saw is manageable for the smaller trees and logs. I ask Mike to cut the really big wood with his regular chainsaw.

And for major jobs like cutting up & splitting trees for winter firewood, we host work parties. Or chainsaw and beer parties, as Mike likes to call them. We're lucky to have some friends who

enjoy a weekend afternoon outside, doing physical work and then retiring to the house for plenty of pizza or chili and snacks and beverages.

On weekends when I'm able to, I can spend whole days outside, clipping, pruning, clearing, stacking and creating more brush piles, until exhaustion forces a rest or aching muscles will do no more.

Walking the Paths

Mostly, I enjoy daily walks "around the back" as we call it, letting the dogs lead the way on the paths they know well, sniffing everywhere, sometimes racing off in pursuit of something unseen or rarely, seen or heard, as when a late-afternoon group of deer leap the fence, their hooves producing a harp-like twang that sounds along the top wire.

I like the benches for the different vantage points they provide. Unless the blackflies or mosquitoes are unbearable,

or the rain is too heavy, I like to sit for a while and listen to the silence or the wind or the birdcalls. I think of my parents, and how they saw their land evolve from the heavily-grazed scrubland that the original owner, a farmer, found suitable only for beef cattle, to the dense groups of forest that covered it before their deaths.

And I wish I had learnt more from my father, who knew trees so well that he hosted tree identification walks — in winter, to show people how to distinguish bark and branches and bud nodes. He knew every tree on his property, while I struggle to remember which ones are black maple. I know the big old sugar maples, because they have sweet sapsicles in winter and drip sticky liquid on you in spring, but I wish I had learned more from my father when I had the chance.

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