

Walking Without Working

By Gloria Hildebrandt

Every day, unless I'm away from morning to night, or I'm ill, I take the dogs around the back of the property. I have to do this because country dogs, even if they have a lot of land to roam over, tend to stick by the front door if they're outside. They may wander onto the road or over to neighbours if something interests them, but they won't go off on a walk by themselves. They may chase a squirrel or rabbit, but if you want your dogs to have exercise and stimulation, I've found that you still have to take them for walks.

With 14 acres of forest, I can let my dogs run freely. I used to be able to do this when walking on the road, too, but an increase in traffic and some dimwits who drive at idiotic speeds, plus the slow-moving schoolbus that clipped Thomas and broke his leg, have forced me to play it safe and keep them on leash when on the road. In the back it's different.

I have enough paths and trails to be able to take a new route every time, so the dogs remain interested and have to pay attention to where

I'm heading. If they've raced ahead on a path that I don't take, Thomas will backtrack the way he went, until he picks up my scent and catches up to me. Kelly the Border Collie understands geometry and uses triangulation to meet me. Rather like Wayne Gretzky playing hockey, Kelly figures out where I am going to go, and cuts through the forest to reach me. She does this when playing fetch on a lake with waves, too. Mike will throw a stick out into the water, and Kelly will run down the beach to the spot where the waves will bring the stick to her. She's figured out how to make less work for herself.

Yesterday's Poo

Both always want to run ahead of me, and I think it's because I'm so dense that I am absolutely unaware of and utterly wreck all the new smells. They spend time at individual plant stems that overhang the paths, as if deciphering clues left by passing animals, while I plough through, quite oblivious. They are at fresh scat at once, and after careful sniffing, move aside to mark a spot with urine.

If I find scat that I haven't noticed before, I'll call them

and point to it. They usually give a cursory sniff and move on, with a look that makes me feel like the biggest dork possible for not knowing that that poo was so yesterday.

They also make me think that they might just be psychic. Not infrequently, when we're approaching a junction in the paths where there's a choice of ways to go, if I am thinking of taking the less-usual way, they will head off in that direction. Am I giving off signals I'm unaware of? Am I looking at the other path enough that they notice and go in the direction of my gaze? Or can they actually read my mind?

Chores

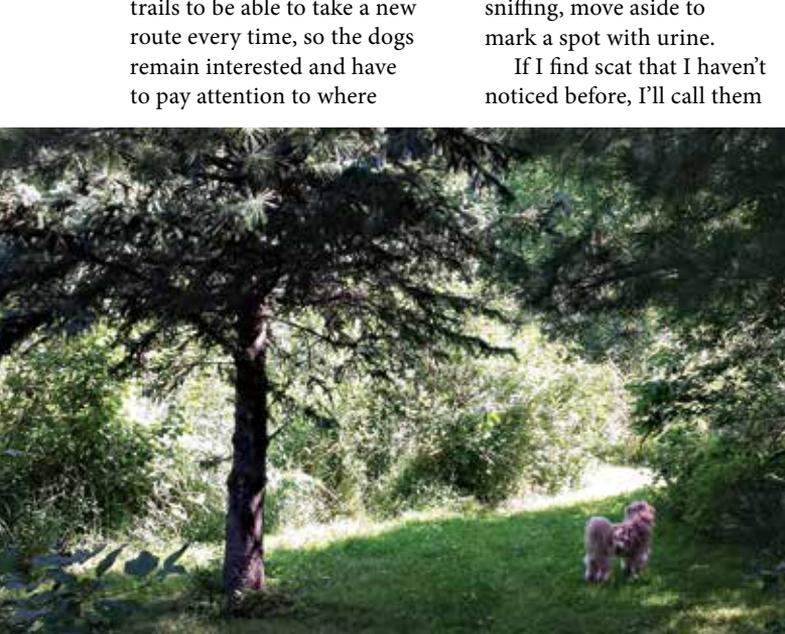
While the dogs and I enjoy the relaxation of walking through the woods, I'm not able to let go completely. I can't help but make a mental list of all the work I should do. There are downed branches still to clear up, broken branches to trim off, grapevines to pull off trees, and Buckthorn to deal with.

I have old, fruit-bearing Buckthorn trees that create generations of offspring. They

will need cutting down and their stumps treated with some poison, apparently. This is a job I will need help with. I also have plantations of baby Buckthorn to remove. I discovered that when the ground is damp, I can actually pull up a lot of the babies, roots and all. So my walk sometimes includes weeding out Buckthorn and hanging the little trees in the crotch of bigger trees, in order for the roots to dry out. I tell visitors that I hang them up in order to scare the other Buckthorns and they smile politely in recognition of the joke. Later while on my walks, I can gather the bunches of dried Buckthorns and bring them back for burning.

So once upon a time my walks around the back were aimless and pleasurable. Now I walk and have to tell myself to relax, let go and enjoy the walk without turning it into a mission.

Gloria Hildebrandt is co-founder, co-publisher and editor of this magazine.



◀ Originally my father's dog, Thomas has always known this land as his home. PHOTO BY GLORIA HILDEBRANDT.

▲ Kelly among the summer's lush growth, waiting for us to catch up. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.