

Clarissa Winters

A Novice Forest Dweller

I am a pure southern Californian, a suburban-dwelling, cityscape spectator. But this does not mean that I enjoy spending my free time fiercely wandering about the Los Angeles nightlife while fearing to go into the mountains just half an hour away from my house. I have always possessed a kindred spirit for wildlife and nature, despite my lack of exposure to it.

Because I grew up in such an urban and developed setting, I never got the nature based childhood that many Michiganders here do. I would be lying if I said it wasn't a little alienating to hear all of my fellow classmates talking about all of the fishing, camping, and hunting they did with their parents during summers in their cabins up north. But, because of the new outdoor experience I have been gaining via my fisheries and wildlife classes, I have been able to find sanctuary in all natural landscapes, and find myself at peace and equality with nature rather than at a disadvantage to it.

Prior to my outing to the Baker Woodlot, home to the Rachana Rajendra Neo-tropical Migrant Bird Sanctuary, I had never trekked through a forest. It sounds ridiculous considering I had always viewed nature as not only a refuge for animals but also a personal oasis, but forest land, undisturbed by civilization, is hard to come by where I live. Before visiting Lake Lansing, I had only ever been to Perris Lake, a man-made lake located in the Inland Empire in California. I never had the opportunity growing up to visit all of these natural wonders, but now that I am at Michigan State University, and studying fisheries and wildlife as well as forestry, I have the chance to explore nature and actually see all of my favorite plants and flowers, walk through native grasses, and see wildlife species that are exotic to me, like deer, muskrat, and hawks. Though I miss California, I think I have found home in Michigan, and sanctuary in its nature.

I possess many personal experiences with nature that have led me to the conviction that the environment is my own particular haven. I can recall having anxiety attacks and needing to cool off. I would take my dogs for a walk down the trail in my neighborhood and in the park just a few blocks down from my house where we could run in the grass and my dogs could sniff all of the trees and flowers and meet other dogs. This was always a very relaxing and enriching activity for me because my dogs, these little animals, always take time to “stop and smell the roses”, an activity that us humans often forego. We can learn so much from animals, and these walks with my dogs are just the tip of the iceberg. Upon coming to Michigan State University and becoming a part of the fisheries and wildlife program, I was enrolled into a fisheries and wildlife lab. Here I would learn the basics of forest navigation, outdoor skills, and plant and animal identification. My professor and teaching assistant continually stressed the importance of the utilitarian purpose that nature possesses, not just in terms of material gains from wildlife, but also in terms of spiritual gains. I have a particularly fond memory of our trip to the Fenner Nature Center in Lansing that exemplifies this important intersection between humans and nature. As we journeyed through the woodlot, we collected edible plants to use in tea and noted the uses of other plants, such as lamb’s ear and osage orange. There was a lookout to a small wetland, pictured here, that was very beautiful and calming as we relaxed from walking.



With this experience, I was able to cultivate the idea that while nature is beautiful to look at and be surrounded by, it also has uses that we can harvest to our advantage, further ingraining the idea of nature as a resource-rich sanctuary, something that I can benefit from being involved with. Even more so, I loved visiting Park Lake. Here, I was particularly enthralled by using dip nets to collect insects and wading in the cold water on a cloudy day. I got to ride on a boat for the first time, an experience that, although this sounds silly, made me feel truly alive. I felt like I was really exploring nature in new ways and becoming familiar with all of the resources and opportunities that MSU has to offer. Here I was, thinking that we would just go to the classroom on the first day and get taught the syllabus like all of my other courses, but instead, we took our first trip to the Baker Woodlot. I knew so little about the MSU campus back then, and I was

awed that the campus encompassed multiple natural areas for student use. Even more striking was the fact that the Baker Woodlot was a migrant bird sanctuary, a safe place for them despite the loud, busy college campus just a few blocks down the road. The Baker Woodlot was especially spiritual for me considering its memorial. Rachana Rajendra's caring and passionate spirit permeates here. I am lucky to have such a beautiful opportunity to explore this woman's love of nature just mere minutes away. During the trip, my professor had us close our eyes and listen purely to the sounds of the forest. I recall hearing the buzzing and chirping bugs, and the songs of the birds whose stirrings made the tree branches creak and their leaves rustle. That singular moment, listening to the forest breathe, inculcated me to physically adopt the idea of nature as my sanctuary. I trust that this belief, sense, serenity, and awareness in nature is all that Rachana could have ever hoped for visitors to gain. Prior to my experiences in lab, going on hikes and nature walks was a mere desire, something I saw in pictures on social media; but I never thought I would be able to travel to all of the beautiful places that these adventurers explored; I didn't know that I'd be able to go right behind my apartment and watch the Red Cedar River flow downstream, but because of this experience, I learned I could. I am enlightened by my experiences in my fisheries and wildlife lab not only because of the knowledge and skills I gained, but also because of the new places I learned about that I can catalog and visit as new safe havens.

Like the wonderful Rachana, I find the simpler things in life superior to the glamorous: when I grow up, I want dogs, birds in my garden, a house, and to read books in the woods outside this house; this would be my sanctuary. I want to feel soil in my hands and see dirt on my boots; I want to wash my hands with cold pond water and use the tree canopy as my umbrella. I want to interpret nature so that I can heal my soul's troubles. Shakespeare says, "And this, our

life exempt from public haunt, finds tongues in trees, books in running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything. One touch of nature makes the whole world kin.” I think that we can all find wisdom and refuge in nature if we take a moment to appreciate the harmony between plants and animals, between Earth and all of its wonders, and apply this knowledge to ourselves to create harmony between each other and the environment.

I find it charming, really, that we can use the word sanctuary in two ways. Yes, a sanctuary is a refuge for animals, a safe place for wildlife where they can remain unharmed by human activities, where they can live without fear of surviving through the next season. But a sanctuary can also mean the region in nature that we find ourselves frequenting because it offers us haven and serenity. It is a safe place for humans where we can remain untouched by our stressful activities, where we can live without fear of judgment. We can breathe cleaner air, walk through untouched land, become trailblazers in a forest, swim in higher tides, look through clearer waters, and make the first steps in freshly fallen snow. We can meet furry friends along the way too, and although they’ll leave us on the path, they won’t hurt us in the departure. We’ll see pretty flowers and brightly colored fish that will not die on our desks over a month. We will see everything that we’ve been wanting to see in our personal lives; success, pioneering, clarity, sense, perfection, and beauty. We can make understanding of the world by looking through nature’s lens. We’ll see struggles among wolves and deer, fights between potential alpha males, and dying trees in the middle of an ice storm in February. But we’ll grow to see that all of these trials are essential to the persistence of nature’s course. Wolves must eat, packs must have a leader, and trees must crack and bend a little to nature’s whim.

I have come to see sanctuaries as more than just safe places or get-aways. A sanctuary is somewhere humans can go to enrich their minds, enhance their souls, and supplement their daily

routine. My sanctuary in nature allows me to befriend and protect wildlife; it is a place where humanity and nature unite to reflect the truly symbiotic relationship between man and animal. I can make reflections in my personal life relative to nature and its course, and embolden myself through witnessing the triumph that nature everlastingly holds over itself. My sanctuary is like no other because it is neither an edifice I can build for myself nor a private temple for me to pray in; it is an environment I share, it is an encyclopedia for all of the plants and animals I could ever hope to come across, a zoo without cages, a garden without fences, a place I cannot construct or even hope to replace, and a home to those of us like Rachana Rajendra who are best friends to animals and guardians to nature.