

Madeline Carr
Dr. Hayes
FW 101 L
Dec.6,2017

Seeing Sanctuary

It is in the quiet, still moments that the noise of nature is realized; the chirps and whirrs of the chickadee, chattering chipmunks flitting through the leaf litter, the soft hum of insects whispering through the bark and soil. A vibration of tiny, pulsing hearts and cells surrounds. We are never really alone. In her novel "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek", nature writer Annie Dillard refers to this sensory overload simply as "seeing". The first time I remember *seeing* was as a child in the heart of the Huron National Forest. Amid the maple and poplar trees I would run along the same little trail behind our family campsite, imagining myself as a bounding red-tail fox, trying to spot the drumming woodpeckers. On one particular June morning in 1998, I woke before my parents to an overture of bird song in the forest. I skipped past my normal path, veering towards an unfamiliar patch in the woods where a large tree was down, allowing the sunlight to warm the small clearing that had overgrown with ferns. Densely packed and covered in dew, the ferns refracted the early morning light in a cloudy, yellow-tinged haze. I stood for a while, watched and listened with intensity as if the forest was letting me in on a piece of juicy gossip. In retelling this memory, it always comes up short of conveying the shape of the light through the open canopy, and while I could try harder to describe the fern-light, it gives me satisfaction to know that I am the only one who was in on the secret of those moments.

For me, this is what a sanctuary is; a space to be in the present, and be in a present that is uniquely your own. Over time, my perception of sanctuaries and their importance has been undulating; from a carefree child in the forest to a stress-addled university student, I have both embraced and neglected why having these spaces are valuable for humans and wildlife. Through

time spent in the Rajendra Neotropical Migrant Bird Sanctuary, I have been reminded of the holistic and naturalistic roots that inspired my choice to pursue a wildlife-focused education, and appreciation for the perspectives of all the beings sharing these sanctuaries.

This is where I and the woodpecker most likely differ; both living in the Midwest United States, our sanctuaries comprise of the same limited undisturbed area but our reliance on seeing within that sanctuary has vastly different implications. For the woodpecker, seeing is survival. During a class trip to Baker Woodlot, we were instructed to close our eyes and listen to the forest; my two minutes spent with eyes closed listening for the wriggles of life was a pleasant moment in an afternoon. However, for migrating or wintering birds it is the lifeline for having the energy to survive winter. In the noise of traffic, alarms, and humming powerlines, the soft tickle of bug legs under bark goes unheard. Thus, providing sanctuary for species, especially migratory birds, has become essential for their persistence. Through research and scientific integrity within the boundaries of a sanctuary, we are able to collect integral data to make educated decisions about avian conservation. Without these undisturbed habitats to attract migrants, the technical workings of how such tiny hearts can fuel cross-continent journeys would remain unknown. Sanctuaries can provide us with this setting to observe, research, and, whether the avian community is aware or not, give back to the natural world after all our exploitation.

While the woodpeckers invested in the present, I grew older and spent less time outdoors; my senses were obscured by busy schedules and social anxieties. I never lost interest in the environment or ecology, but my perspective had shifted from a carefree, childish enjoyment to that of a professional relationship; the natural world had become an object that I was determined to understand through my education and career. This cold demeanor was broken on a class trip to Baker Wood Lot, which I had anticipated would be just another pleasant walk outdoors. Luckily,

sanctuary is there, waiting to spark in the darkness of complacency and apathy, whether you ask for it or not. While a lecture was being given in this outdoor classroom, the hearty *Wuk! Wuk! Wuk!* of a Pileated Woodpecker cut through the discussion. Like the child that used to imagine herself as a fox, ears perked, I dashed off down the trail in hopes to catch a glimpse of the charismatic bird, forgetting that, typically, adults don't run and play in the woods (especially in front of a large group of peers they've just met 20 minutes prior). The natural world has this capability to wash away the social anxieties, even eliminate the concept of self-confidence to allow for the gleeful, childlike impulses that societal pressures stifle. I realized then that, when surrounded by birds, I can be driven to act without inhibitions. Sanctuaries are the space that allow for this freedom of impulse and genuine interest; where time learning in a classroom can be informative, learning in a sanctuary is insightful. Despite my effort, I was unsuccessful in visually *observing* the Pileated, but in my excitement and willingness to search I had, in the Dillard sense, truly *seen* it.

While preserving natural areas for these human and ecological benefits is typically assigned to policy makers and government agencies, it takes the spirit and effort of passionate individuals to inspire and maintain a Sanctuary. This too is the case with the Rajendra Neotropical Migratory Bird Sanctuary; through the legacy of her life loving birds and spending time outside, Rachana and her family have created a space that acts not only a refuge for Neotropical Migrants, but for all students. For myself, the Sanctuary has served as a reminder of the reasons why I chose to pursue conservation, not just take classes to get a career. The laugh of the Pileated Woodpecker housed within the Sanctuary was an alarm waking me from apathy. Being on a college campus, many students may not have spent much, or any time at all, in a

Michigan forest. For some, the outdoors may be unfamiliar or unfriendly, but with sanctuaries like that Rachana has inspired, the door is always open.

This is perhaps the most important aspect of a sanctuary; the inclusivity for every being to have their moment in the present, and have those unique moments be appreciated equally. Huddled on the path of Baker Woodlot, our class listened as a collective yet each person heard a different forest. While I took in the songs and calls from the avian community, other students noticed the sharp snap of twigs under a doe's weight or the herbaceous scent of the nearby wetland soils. Each mind and body brings with it a different set of values that, perhaps unknowingly, seek out our innate passions and interests. This distinction may be why it is that zoos, while entertaining, lack the spark of perspective. We all stand behind the glass and observe the same, planned presence of animals. Sanctuaries such as Baker Woodlot are steeped in serendipity; it is by happenstance that the surrounding life is there, simultaneously, utilizing that space. A walk along the trail, while following the same path, winds through a different neighborhood each day. This dynamic composition, in combination with the variety of human backgrounds and experiences, produces individualistic perceptions and associations that cannot be homogenized. This was seen again on a boat ride across the nearby Park Lake, when a fellow student exclaimed, wide-eyed in awe, that it was his first time on the water. He was seeing something that I couldn't. I can't begin to imagine what it was, but I know at that moment he was in the present, he had sight, and while it did not strike the same visceral reaction for me, I appreciated that he got to have that moment.

All sanctuaries, even those seemingly isolated from one another such as the lake and the woodlot, are interconnected by the students they inspire. Like the birds that fly from patch to patch along their migration journey, filling up on the abundant fruits and seeds, students that flit

through these natural areas are fueling up. For the many students that get to experience a walk through the Bird Sanctuary, we get our fill of ecological understanding, childlike wonder, and sights to take with us, continuing the legacy set forth by Rachana and her family.