

Back Trails

Perspectives on People and Nature

Nature only a blue jay's call away by Reba Laks

Some kids are just naturally drawn to the outdoors. While those who grow up in rural areas have nature at their doorsteps, those of us who got our start in urban environs find nature to be a bit more elusive. Still, it can be found if one looks closely.

When I was young, my family lived in a Bronx housing project. At age six or seven, I wasn't conscious of paying any more attention to creatures and plants than anyone else. I played hopscotch and jumped Double Dutch rope along with the other kids. In the playground, I climbed the monkey bars, swung as high as I could on metal swings, and ran through sprinklers in the summer. I raced along the pavement on roller skates, and ran around with sparklers at dusk on the Fourth of July.

The project did have areas of grass and trees, but these were closed off by hedges and wooden fences and wire. One risked a handful of splinters and a palm stained red if you tried to climb over the fence, as well as being yelled at by maintenance workers. My third-floor apartment bedroom window overlooked one of these fenced-in areas and the cool green grass beckoned to me below—seen, but out of reach. Yet, directly outside my window was an oak tree, its branches dipping toward the ground. Strikingly-colored blue jays called raucously as they flew among the branches. Grey squirrels leaped about. In the courtyard between the buildings, little sparrows hopped about looking for crumbs that people might have dropped. In spring, a sweet-smelling white flower blossomed on the hedges. Maple trees



Ray Minnick

grew in the surrounding neighborhood. Like many kids, I took their seeds and stuck them on my nose.

I didn't know the names of many of these creatures and plants, but their appearance was etched firmly in my mind. Perhaps it was better that no one identified them for me; instead, I absorbed their characteristics. Years later, as I began to study natural history, it was like rediscovering old friends. "Ah," I would say to myself, "that was a pin oak outside my window, a privet hedge along the walkway and a house (or English) sparrow in the courtyard."

I remember being happy in the housing project. There were other children to play with and I always felt safe. My mother was only a yell away; I freely went up and down the building elevator by myself. I did envy the occupants of nearby houses with small backyards of their own. Inside were gardens of tomato plants and flowers. In

my young mind, I resolved that one day, I would have a plot of land to call my own.

My carbon footprint has certainly grown over the years. Back then, I walked with friends to the playground, with my brother to school, and with Mom to nearby stores. Our family had a car that Dad drove to work, but we also traveled by train and subway. Ours was not a pollution-free environment, considering the smog and ever-present vehicle exhaust.

When I was eight, my family left the project and moved to Staten Island in search of the American dream—owning our own home. There we did indeed have a small backyard. Though life on Staten Island was, in some ways, culture shock to me (the kids didn't play hopscotch, Double Dutch or roller skate), the fields, woods and local pond quickly lured me outdoors. Tree-climbing, exploring, sledding and skating quickly became favorite activities. While I found some aspects of adjustment into a new community difficult, nature and the outdoors became a healing retreat.

For years now, I have lived in a house in the Catskills on a couple acres of land. Deer, turkeys, opossum and occasionally even a bear wander through my backyard. Today, I couldn't imagine going back to a big-city apartment building. Still, when I think back on my urban beginnings, I remember family, friends to play with and nature only a blue jay's call away.

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