

Back Trails

Perspectives on People and Nature

John Bulmer

Accidental Outdoor Writer by John Pitarresi

I had no intention of becoming an outdoor writer.

The guy who had the job came in one day, asked for a raise, didn't get it, and quit. A moment later, the sports editor came out of the boss' office, walked over to my desk and said, "You're writing the outdoor column."

What? I was not pleased. Sure, I loved to hunt and fish, but I had been a full-time sportswriter for nearly a decade, a football/basketball/hockey/baseball guy. My outdoor writing had been limited to an opening day deer hunting or trout fishing story each year. I had no idea how to be an outdoor writer.

Thirty-three years later, I continue to write "Outdoors" for the *Utica Observer-Dispatch*, although some readers might tell you I still have no idea what I'm doing. I write it every week, celebrating outdoors people, telling their stories and a few of my own, commenting on issues, writing a little natural history, picking up a local angle on a national story sometimes, adding a bit of adventure, digging up some history, and producing a travelogue now and then.

I've learned more about the outdoors by writing the column—talking to sources, reading, researching, going into the field with experts and experienced outdoors people—than any of my readers ever learned from me. That might not seem fair or right, but it is the way it is.

Sometimes folks ask me which column I like most. I don't really have a favorite of the 1,600 or so I've written. I suppose the ones I like best are about people.

Take my grandfather, for example. He hunted with us until he was well past 90, and was the heart and soul of our camp. When I wrote about him the year he died—his colorful personality, a few of his outrageous foibles, and what he meant to us without saying it in so many words—I got more reaction than for anything I had written up to that time.

Or the hunter who called me about the huge buck he had found several years before. He still had the arrow that killed it, and with that I was able to track down the archer who shot it. Thanks to a generous fellow hunter, a little detective work, and a lot of luck, we got that trophy back where it belonged...and a great story to boot.

It's not always about people.

There was the fellow who called about the dying red-tailed hawk he found in his backyard. The bird wore a leg band that led me to the guy who had banded it at Hawk Mountain, PA as a mature bird more than 25 years earlier, meaning it was at least 27 years old. That story wrote itself.

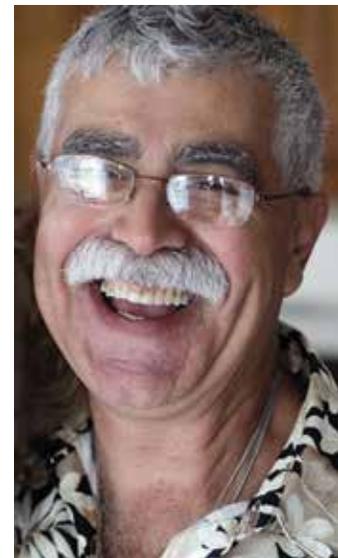
A recent column was about the thousands of snow geese that made a home on the old Valley View reservoirs in Utica for several weeks last winter. They made an astoundingly imposing sight and a heck of a lot of noise as they corkscrewed down out of the sky each day. Columns on birds tend to bring a good deal of comment, perhaps because birds are everywhere, are easy to watch, and are endlessly interesting.

If anything has changed over the years, I think it is that people tend to be a bit more aware of the natural world than when I started. I'd like to think I had something to do with that.

I was never told what the column's mission should be, and I don't know that I ever made a conscious decision myself. It just evolved, and continues to do so: to open up a small window on the natural world, to inform my readers, to celebrate their accomplishments, to challenge them a bit, to entertain them, to make them laugh and, maybe, once in a great while, make them shed a tear.

I hope it has done those things, and will continue to do so for a while longer. But I do know this for sure: no one has gotten more out of the experience than I have.

A Niagara Falls native, **John Pitarresi** honed his writing skills at Hamilton College, joined the *Utica Observer-Dispatch* shortly thereafter, and never looked back.



Nancy L. Ford