

Back Trails

Perspectives on People and Nature

Of Time and Wool Coats

By Bill Healy

On Christmas morning, 2006, I open a big box. It holds a new brown-and-gray plaid Woolrich jacket, something I've wanted for years. In my opinion, that plaid is some of the best camouflage ever made for hardwood forests in autumn, and wool is the best material for hunting and woods work. Georgie, my wife, smiles and hopes that, once and for all, I will dispose of my old brown plaid Woolrich. That coat is a tad more than 40 years old, and has been called ragged, even disgusting. The cuffs are tattered, and the leather collar trim has mostly worn away. But it's comfortable and perfect for outdoor work.

“To an outdoorsman, few things in life are as important as the choice of a coat.”

Through January, the old coat and my beagle, Molly, accompany me as I work around the farm. In my woodlot, I remove damaged trees to set healthy saplings free. Seedlings and saplings reach for the sun, and I help them with ax and chainsaw. Elsewhere, thickets of crabapple, blackberry and other fruiting shrubs dot the farm's former pastures. Here, I remove the saplings. The thickets are full of wildlife now, but they are ephemeral. Trees will crowd out the berries and shrubs in a decade or two. Nature will eventually turn these thickets to forest, but each winter I cut saplings

to delay the metamorphosis so I can enjoy the berries, shrubs and wildlife for a few more years. All the while, Georgie wonders why I don't wear the new Woolrich. I explain that it's just too nice.

“February is bitter cold. The old coat keeps me warm around the farm; the new coat is reserved for trips to town.”

Old coats are a family tradition. My dad's red-and-black plaid Woolrich, circa 1950, passed through me to my oldest son, and is still used during deer season. I gave my first wool coat to my youngest son when it got too snug around my middle. The coat, you see, retains its youthful figure.

March arrives and the new coat gets its first major social outing: the regional fur auction. These events have occurred essentially unchanged since colonial times. Trappers leave the mountains with their furs and assemble at a central location. For two days, they consign their furs, which are inspected and sorted into lots of like species and quality. On Sunday, buyers arrive from exotic places, and the lots are auctioned off.

I assist at the sale, doing paperwork and hanging furs. Over the weekend, thousands of furs, beaver, mink, muskrat, raccoon, fox, skunk and more fill the racks and floor space behind my work station. The scents are distinctive. Besides fur, dealers sell aromatic animal attractants like fox urine

and beaver castor. The new wool coat hangs on the back of my chair, its natural fibers drinking deeply of all that surrounds it. When I arrive home Sunday night, Georgie hugs me and announces, “You stink.” I hang the new coat on a kitchen chair, and Molly is transfixed. She stands motionless for two minutes, nostrils flaring rhythmically, before greeting me with a full body wag. The new coat is taking on character. I wonder, at age 65, if I will live long enough for this Woolrich to reach the venerable stage of the old coat.

March gives way to spring, and the wool coats spend more time indoors than out. Georgie wonders if I'll ever get rid of that old coat. Not as long as it is still so good, I tell her.

May arrives, and the coats hang side-by-side on the sun porch, awaiting autumn's first frost.

As they wait, I wonder. Perhaps character is being transferred from the old coat to the new.



Bill Healy

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