

And Then there Were Blooms or... Notes from an Allergy Sufferer

By Rob Bettaso

It is midday, late in March and from my perch atop a largish boulder, I'm looking down upon a smallish pond. Two Mallards have paired up and are foraging in the shallow, turbid water. The drake's metallic green head catches the light and then, plop, goes under water to tug at pond weeds. His rump end is pointed straight up, the black and white tail feathers suddenly eclipsed by his comically orange, clown-like webbed feet which he slowly paddles to maintain his head's position below the water's surface. He's treading water, upside-down. The hen floats placidly nearby, more dignified, less hungry.

I've strolled a mile or two to get here, somewhere in a northern section of the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest. I'm letting a Spring sun warm me like a lizard. I should goop on sun-screen now that the sun has become an adversary of sorts. When did that happen? Sometime, in my lifetime, things shifted from carefree days when, as a youth, catching herps in the fields near my Michigan home, it was considered "safe" to allow my skin to tan as brown as a nut by a friendlier sun. Not so, in our 21st Century.

To me, that change, from the notion of a munificent, life-giving sun to a malevolent, cancer-causing cosmic Ray-gun is significantly more amazing than putting some guys on the moon. Speaking of which, while the moon was never made of green cheese, it was, supposedly, a dry barren wasteland. Now, apparently, we've learned it once had water; was, most likely, a chunk lopped off from Mother Earth. Some of the planets and some of their moons too were "historically" deemed uniformly parched but in recent years have revealed the presence of water, albeit in its frozen form and as swirling vapors. "Change is constant" as they say, especially when it comes to human understanding. Truth is tentative.

My stratospheric mental wanderings are momentarily pulled back down to earth as a Western Bluebird alights on a nearby shrub, his blue back feathers contrasting with his rusty breast. Fortunately, his reputation hasn't changed; he's still the Bluebird of Happiness. And today, he's far from alone in that regard. But mine is a mixture of emotions -- joy at being outdoors on a beautiful Spring day but tinged also with the worries that modern life brings. I confess that sometimes I think that I may have been born two centuries later than my true destiny.

Soon, my untethered thoughts are again floating free and turn next to the landscape around me; to the trees, in their various stages of Spring growth. To modify and re-purpose the words of James Agee: "Let us now praise great trees." When you stop to think about it, a tree is truly a miraculous piece of living art.

Pondering the gnarly oaks, still quite devoid of any signs of new life -- they remind me of aerial LANDSAT photos of great river basins -- the oak's trunk analogous to, say, the main stem of the mighty Amazon; the heavier limbs to major tributaries and so on and so forth until you reach the outermost twigs, representing those myriad brooks and rills that feed the upper hydrology of any given river system.

Here and there, cottonwoods assert their fresh growth -- a gauzy sheen of lime green, the individual buds not quite discernable from a short distance. Similarly, the willows, now just a skein of young shoots providing an intricate web of protection for perching songbirds. Life is everywhere: unfurling, erupting, changing.

On my walk to this pond, I was startled by the sudden whirring of Mourning Dove wings as a Sharp-shinned Hawk swooped and barrel rolled across my field of view. The hawk, upon missing his target, banked and rose upward, landing high up on an oak limb to survey the aftermath of his broken play. The doves were long gone, the only mourning to be done now was by the hawk. You can't miss too many kills when you have a nest full of ravenous offspring to feed.

I came to grips with the "cruelties" of nature long ago but I've never been able to fully reconcile myself to the wanton harm done to the planet by our species, ratcheting up exponentially about the time of the Industrial Revolution. Today, I'm surrounded by the wonders and majesty of our living planet but always whispering persistently in my mind is the awareness that shocking changes are happening fast all around us. As the great conservationist, Aldo Leopold, once said: "The penalty of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds."

Sure, we've made some progress since the days when the Cuyahoga River caught fire and burned for days on end but we're still a long way from any kind of "Ecotopia." I recall a recent (this past February) text exchange between a grade school friend (Bob, who lives in Akron, Ohio) and me:

Bob (stating a fact): "Weather note - high temp today 75; low temp tomorrow 26." My stunned reply: "Wow, don't recall such extreme fluctuations when we were kids. Oh yeah, climate change...." Bob (again, simply stating the Akron area weather report): "Involves possible tornadoes!" My response (now joking): "Today's forecast - burning liquid metal raining down from the sky. Followed by a fog of deadly vapors." His retort (maintaining the levity): ".... And in today's sports news...."

Bob and I do that a lot: poking fun, making light. I suppose it gets to that old expression about "sometimes you gotta laugh to keep from crying" although I'm not sure that's really the best way to deal with the predicament we find ourselves in when it comes to

environmental degradation. Then again, if the juggernaut has already been unleashed, perhaps that is about the only way to cope. YOLO?

But for now, I choose another option, that of making the most of what Mother Nature has to offer while I'm still lucky enough to have good health and high spirits. And here in the White Mountains, well, there are thankfully plenty of untrammelled wild lands to adore and to explore.

I decide to hike on a bit further and, as I do, I reflect back on just a few of the affirming, local activities in which I engaged in 2016 but never got around to writing about in the pages of *Get Your Mountain On Arizona*. To wit: there was the kayak outing on Chevelon Creek in a clifflike and relatively wide reach of that stream; bike riding at sunset and into the night at Petrified Forest National Park as part of a "Reptile Blitz" conducted annually by Park personnel using volunteer assistants; dove hunting in a field of chest-high sunflowers north of Pinetop; wood-cutting near Mount Baldy; a bull elk hunt near Morgan Mountain and another east of Springerville along our border with New Mexico; a volunteer trip helping the Game and Fish Department monitor the fishery in the West Fork of the Black River; several trips to the Salt River Canyon to hike and camp and day hikes and mountain bike rides too numerous for me to even remember.

After my jaunt, I return home and, later in the day, get a call from my friend Dave, inviting me to climb Porter Mountain with him and another friend (Rick) the next morning. I suggest that Porter isn't exactly pristine hiking country (we'll be walking on a service road the entire time) but Dave informs me that he and Rick are considering doing a "Rim to Rim" trip at the Grand Canyon soon and want to train for it by routinely walking Porter Mountain. "Makes sense," I say, "color me there."

The next morning Dave picks me up and we meet Rick at the rendezvous. After exchanging pleasantries, we commence hiking. Because we're moving at least twice as fast as I would normally walk and because the road up is rather steep, I am huffing and puffing in no time. Normally, I think it feels good to exert myself on a walk and I generally enjoy the sensation of blood coursing through my veins, drawing clean air deeply into my lungs and stretching out my leg muscles. Today, my lungs actually hurt and I'm wondering if I'm coming down with something.

When we get to the top, we boldly (foolishly?) stride through the corridor of various towers (radio, cell, microwave; a regular Fritz Lang nightmare). The view from the summit is impressive but I'm surprised by all the dust in the air and say so to my companions. Rick suggests that it is probably pollen. I'm shocked but agree that his theory makes sense as it is allergy season and, for the first time in my life, I've even been exhibiting the symptoms (sneezing, sniffing, eyes itching, etcetera) in these past few weeks.

We finish our gawking and descend back to the vehicles and decide that we'll do one more lap up and down and then call it good. When the time comes to drive home, Dave and I are tooling through the neighborhood when suddenly a great cloud of pollen is released from a lone juniper. We both comment on how curious it is that the junipers can sometimes do that -- let loose all their pollen at once.

I begin to wonder if my "heavy chest" feeling might actually be the result of so much pollen in the air. I imagine the pollen grains as they might look under a microscope, on high power, spiky spheres chock-full of caustic compounds, rasping away at the alveoli of my lungs.

Dave pulls up to my drive; we say good-by and I walk over to one of my bird feeders to fill it up with seed. Nearby, on the edge of my property, a juniper shoots out a jet-spray of pollen, like some hokey (fake) plant on an alien world from an old Star Trek episode. Hmmmm, I think, the juniper can broadcast spray or target spray its pollen. Neat trick.

Around back, while filling a second feeder, I notice a few iris blooms poking up and see also that my neighbor's Forsythia has, seemingly overnight, erupted into full bloom. Winter is over and summer is yet to come; the poet's debate whether the world will end in "fire or ice" has been replaced in our season of Spring with the thought that, if I have to be gassed to death by exploding pouches of pollen, well, at least they won't have far to walk to pick a few flowers for my grave.

I chuckle to myself and head indoors to rustle up some biscuits and gravy. Healthy heart food...who cares, the very air seems to be out to get me....