

Summer of the Rattlesnake

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It had been a battle keeping the kid's flashlights off, but we thought that it had been worth the effort. We had wanted them to have the full experience of the woods at night, to be able to see without being seen by all the life around them. We had been thinking in terms of the smaller sorts of wildlife – and by the end of the walk, we'd already caught a brightly colored red salamander and several of the familiar northern duskies.

Now, for the walk back, we were doing our best to fully enforce the No-Flashlight rule; perhaps if we were successful we would get the chance to hear a barred owl or other nocturnal bird. That is, if we could enforce silence as well. We were fighting a losing battle on the silence front until it fell all of its own accord at the sound of crackling beside the path.

We quickly pointed our flashlights in the direction of the sound – and illuminated the long sinuous body of a fully grown timber rattlesnake. The light from our flashlights reflected off his scales, and we could clearly see a lump in the middle of his stomach where he had lodged his dinner. There was a correspondingly large lump in my throat as we walked on, after standing for several moments in awe.

It seemed as though moments like that, moments where the inner workings of nature were suddenly and unexpectedly revealed, were common at Nature Camp. The year I saw the timber rattlesnake was the year I went back to camp to teach, because I'd gotten too old to go back there to learn. I couldn't bear to be parted from a place I loved so much, and I figured I would somehow manage to develop whatever it was my counselors had that had kept me coming back as a camper for so many years. Never mind the fact that I have a recurring tendency to avoid all person-to-person interactions (too fraught with the danger of awkward silences and social faux pas). I'd deal with that when the time came.

Anyway, what I remember most about my counselors was not their social abilities; it was the look on their faces when they were given the honor of catching a hidden glimpse of the natural world. I still remember the glowing look on our ornithology teacher's face when she found a hummingbird nest lodged in the fork of a tree at the end of camp. The branch was mottled with lichen, and the nest itself was not much more than a lichen-colored bump with a hole in it large enough to fit

my thumb. Maybe. The whole thing was only visible through a tiny gap amidst the profusion of green leaves. I remember filling with excitement as Natalie carefully directed my binoculars in the right direction and the little nest came into focus.

When I went back to camp to teach, I taught freshwater ecology. I taught kids that when you turn over rocks in the stream, you are uncovering a whole world full of alien creatures – the larvae of stoneflies, mayflies and caddisflies – little bugs that, if they were magnified to human proportions, would be fearsome dragons and deadly wild beasts.

As it is, a mayfly larvae will fit in the palm of your hand, and if you fill the palm of your hand with water, its delicate gills will vibrate quickly back and forth to extract all the oxygen from that water supply. I realized it doesn't take any fine-tuned social graces to place a captured mayfly in the eager hands of a child and to watch his face light up with the same excitement I felt when I finally focused on the hummingbird nest.

I'd gone back to Nature Camp because I couldn't bear to stay away from it, but on doing so I found something as

rewarding as discovering a hidden nest smaller than my thumb, or hearing the crackling of last fall's leaves beneath the body of a timber rattlesnake. I

discovered the pleasure of listening to the joyful shouts of children who are holding a mayfly for the first time, and hearing gasps of wonder from

someone who has never seen a snake in the wild before. I figure that if I can instill that sense of wonder in even a few people, my life will have been worth it.



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