A WALK IN THE WOODS OF PIEDMONT NORTH CAROLINA
By David Otto

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Each of the events in the natural world is a poem, a painting, a drama, a celebration.

-Thomas Berry

Thomas Berry warns that “We no longer hear the voice of the rivers, the mountains or the sea. The trees and meadows are no longer intimate modes of spirit presence. The world about us has become an ‘it’ rather than a ‘thou’” (Thomas Berry, The Great Work, 1999, 17). Too often we are caught up in the treacherous currents of today’s tragedy or scandal repeated monotonously on MSNBC or Fox News. However, this needn’t be the case. Regular walks in the woodlands offer a simple cure.
One of the joys of walking in the woods is the opportunity to escape from the stress, the hustle and bustle, the incessant barrage of information from the Internet and other electronic media which consume our waking hours. Instead, surrender to the slower rhythms of nature. Listen to the song of birds, wind rustling through the leaves, soothing music of water flowing over rocks. Look at the patterns created by wind rippling the surface of a pond or by the flow of a stream over rocks. Lie on the ground and discover the beauty of tiny wildflowers that carpet the woodlands in spring. Let your mind experience the effervescence of spring, the brilliant pageant of autumn and the magical transformation of woodlands after snow.

We are fortunate in the North Carolina Piedmont to have ready access to woodlands, streams and lakes where we can experience the beauty and serenity of nature. The marvelous patterns, rhythms, forms and colors which abound in nature are exciting to see and have kindled the imagination of artists since the dawn of time. Poets express these patterns and rhythms in written and oral form, while painters and photographers portray them in visual form. I would like to share some of the joy I have found wandering along the streams and through the woodlands of this region.

Bolin Creek is a small, but lovely stream that flows through Carrboro and Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Much of the stream corridor has been preserved by the town of Chapel Hill and the University of North Carolina for future generations to enjoy. Join me on a walk through the woodlands, peering into ponds and creeks at continuously changing reflections and rejoicing in the amazing grace of wildflowers.

We will start our walk in spring, a magical season. Deciduous trees suddenly burst out in brilliant, iridescent yellow-greens. Catkins adorn the branches of many, joined soon by miniature leaves in the joyous celebration of renewal. Bolin Creek flows under a railroad trestle just upstream of Estes Drive, a wonderful place to begin our walk.
I will describe some of the trees and flowers that we will see on this walk. Many of these plants have important medicinal qualities known to Native Americans and early settlers, but forgotten or resigned to folklore with the ascendancy of the pharmaceutical industry in the 19th and 20th centuries. The growing popularity of alternative forms of medicine has renewed interest in the medicinal value of native plants, which we will consider in our walk today.

Rue anemone or windflower is one of the first ephemerals that erupt in the woodlands and along streams after winter. The diminutive white flowers carpet the forest floor before the canopy of deciduous leaves covers the woodlands in shadows. Other members of the initial quartet of ephemerals are the jaunty yellow and brown trout lily, the lovely pale blue hepatica and spring beauty, which sometimes delights the eye with beautiful pink striations.

The perfoliate bellwort is one of the most graceful, unassuming and unusual of the spring ephemerals. The pale yellow flower nods shyly along the margins of the forest, blooms briefly and then is gone. The perfoliate nature of the flower, wherein the stem seems to pierce the leaf, and small glands, which form bumps on the inner surface of the sepals, are distinctive features.

Another spring flower that we are apt to see is the crested dwarf iris, found throughout the Southeast. The lovely violet to light blue flower grows on rich wooded slopes and floodplains in partial shade. The name comes from the golden crest on each sepal. The yellow crest guides pollinating insects to the nectar deep within the flower.
The most common trees growing along Bolin Creek are beech, ironwood, sycamore, oak and maple. In April the creek corridor explodes in subtle yellow-green pastels as the leaves emerge. The male flowers of the oak and ironwood form long catkins which hang down from the limbs and produce pollen. The catkins flutter in the breeze, pollinating female flowers, and then drop to the ground. Catkins and pollen floating on the creek produce marvelous abstract patterns.

One of the most colorful trees in the Piedmont woodlands in spring is the red maple. Clusters of tiny quarter-inch flowers bloom and then become pairs of bright red-winged seeds, called samara. Many of us were fascinated with samara as children, delighting in tossing them in the air and watching them spin to the ground. The leaf stems are also red. However, the most spectacular display occurs in autumn when the leaves turn brilliant crimson.

George Humphries, one of the finest nature photographers in North Carolina, published a small book in 1998 entitled *Reflections*. In the preface he wrote: “As (all the great sages) came to know, there is morality in the dawn, integrity in the forests, righteousness in the hum of creeks, and glimpses of heaven in reflections.” Bolin Creek flows over a rock shelf a few hundred yards upstream of the railroad trestle. A wooden pedestrian bridge spans the creek here and is a popular crossing point, as well as an excellent location to view reflections. The jagged edges of the rock ledge distort reflections of tree trunks and foliage in marvelous patterns which vary with water level in the creek, time of day, weather and season. The wooden bridge allows you to shift position over the water to capture the most interesting patterns.
Wild comfrey is a perennial herb, sometimes called Blue Hound’s tongue, which is uncommon in the Piedmont. Clusters of small pale blue flowers bloom atop tall (3-8dm) stalks, with basal clumps of large (1-2dm) fleshy leaves. The herb is valued for its medicinal qualities. Leaves were used by the Cherokee for tobacco and roots for the treatment of cancer.

Coral honeysuckle is the only honeysuckle species native to the Piedmont. The bright red trumpet-shaped flowers attract hummingbird pollinators and are among the most colorful spring flora. Like the bellwort, Coral Honeysuckle is perfoliate.

Black cohosh is an impressive plant, often more than six feet tall. Black cohosh is widely used in folk medicine for its estrogenic and anti-inflammatory qualities. Native Americans and early settlers used the herb to treat a variety of ills including pulmonary problems, snakebite and pain control during childbirth. *Katydid* are nocturnal herbivores, but also eat other slow-moving insects such as caterpillars. This katydid sat patiently on a raceme of the stately black cohosh, posing for a portrait.
The brilliant orange color of butterfly weed attracts butterflies, the reason for one of its common names. Few wildflowers can match the visual impact of orange milkweed, another common name, as you wander the woodlands in summer. This “weed” is like a mischievous child, having alternate leaves and lacking the milky sap found in other members of the milkweed family. Native Americans chewed the roots to treat pleurisy and other lung-related problems, yielding a third common name, pleurisy root.

Asters are among the last wildflowers that bloom along the margins of Piedmont woodlands in autumn. Different species come in white, pink, lavender and purple, contributing a subtle baseline to the brilliant display of trees. Paul Green observed that “For all its beauty [the aster] still awaits the praise of a single Valley poet” (Paul Green’s Plant Book, 2005, 4). A variegated fritillary butterfly is feeding on the aster.

One day I found a splendid fern (ebony spleenwort), shaped liked a dove of peace, growing in the crotch of a large oak tree. This spleenwort closely resembles the Christmas fern, common in local woodlands. The name “ebony” refers to the distinctive dark brown stem. The fern is hardy, drought-tolerant and grows in soil and on rocks and masonry. Ebony Spleenwort is the only North American fern which also grows in South Africa.
The intense yellow, orange and red colors of the sugar maple in October are spectacular. Sap from the tree is refined to make maple syrup (approx. 40 gals. of sap are needed to produce one gal. of syrup) and maple sugar. Timber from the sugar maple is very hard and valued in the manufacture of furniture, flooring and cabinets.

Beech leaves, unlike leaves of other deciduous trees, remain on the tree throughout winter. The light brown beech leaves provide welcome color and contrast in the woodlands during the cold months, while maples, ironwood, hickories and oaks stand naked. When snow cloaks the forest in white, beech leaves stand out like golden jewels.

We have completed our walk along Bolin Creek, enjoying the beauty and wonder of the trees and wildflowers. It is time now to leave the woodlands and return to the more harried pace that characterizes most of our lives. In his essay about "The Meadow across the Creek," in the Great Work, Thomas Berry describes the formative experience of seeing the lilies in the meadow and how that event shaped his thinking throughout life. We too can experience the same epiphany and communion with nature by making a walk through the woods a regular part of our lives.