

Encounters with the Wild Penobscot

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Penobscot River Restoration Trust. © 2006

Spring Rituals

Living within sight of the Penobscot River, one of life's little pleasures is watching the river free herself of winter's hold with the ice break up in early spring. With this year's milder temperatures, it wasn't as dramatic an unfolding as I've come to expect – it seemed one day the ice was there, the next it was gone. Yet, it still came with a sense of relief and anticipation as I looked forward to a number of rituals that my family has come to rely on as harbingers of springtime. The first venture out in the canoe, road trips in search of fresh maple syrup, the song of spring peepers while traveling home from work, and the annual Kenduskaeg canoe race are top on my list of those events that I celebrate as I welcome the warmer weather and the renewed spirit that comes with it.

First canoe outing

My husband and I left work early one afternoon the first week of April to get out on the river. Birch Stream was our destination, but it was quickly apparent that while the mainstem of the Penobscot near our house was ice free, the stream was clinging on to winter with wide stretches of inch-thick ice coating the top. It would have made for an interesting paddle. But, time was short, so we chose to turn onto the Stillwater River, the arm of the Penobscot that wraps around Marsh Island, home to a portion of both the city of Old Town and the town of Orono, and several smaller islands owned by the Penobscot Indian Nation. It was quiet, with the exception of the wingstrokes of waterfowl that were alerted early to our presence, and the filtering of traffic from I-95 winding its way unseen behind a palette of grey and leafless trees. A pair of mallards huddled in a tiny inlet, and further upstream what I hoped might be a merganser slipped quickly out of sight. No other signs of wildlife to entertain us, not even an insect, and we remained silent as we paddled close to shore. It was almost enough to simply soak in the feel of paddle against water as we reacquainted ourselves with the river easing herself out of months of stillness.

The shoreline this time of year is a blend of browns and greys, interrupted by the muted greens of balsam fir and hemlock, and an occasional cedar. The edge had been deeply scoured by the high waters of last fall, and maple trees leaned steadfastly over the river even with half their root systems exposed. A dirt road that runs parallel to the river for about a mile was getting precariously close to the water's edge, and we wondered aloud how much time would pass before the trees were swept downstream and the road would become impassable. It appeared that some animals were taking advantage of the access to new spaces and burrows beneath the trees – perhaps otter had made what appeared to be a slide around and beneath one massive tangle of roots. Beneath us, here and there we could see freshwater mussel shells scattered on the river bottom, mixed with small boulders and last summer's stems of pickerel weed and other plants. One cluster of rocks looked unnatural, hinting at the history of the river. Like many other stretches of the river, old log booms dot the middle of this part of the Stillwater, with pale saplings and dried clutches of grasses and weed sticking up out of the rocks.

While remarkable only for its stillness and silence, this first canoe trip was enough to loosen our limbs, excite our senses to the life we know is hidden within the pale reaches of forest and beneath the waters surface. The sun shot out from between clouds here and there, sending ripples of light to give depth and contour to patches of blue sky and ripples of white and grey. Images from this afternoon will merge with memories of past trips, different seasons, surprise wildlife sightings – adding to the layers of our experience of this river, and the place we've chosen as home.

Watching the Kenduskaeg

Several weeks later, we are on the bridge at Six Mile Falls, joining a small throng of hardy souls watching the 40th Annual Kenduskaeg Canoe Race. The temperature hovers at 45 degrees, and a drizzly rain comes

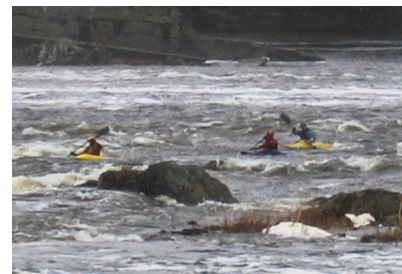
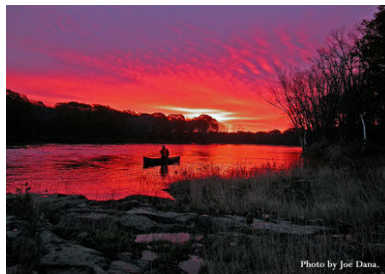
sporadically, as we watch with a strange delight the paddlers being dumped into still-frigid waters. If the weather was warmer and drier, the slopes leading to the edge of the stream would be full of people, and the bridge would be several people deep, watching for friends, cheering on the more serious racers and those who bravely return to their canoes or kayaks after a good soaking, and groaning in sympathy for those who had a particularly rough time passing through the rocks and turbid waters. Nearly 600 participants, in 339 boats, took on the 16 ½ mile trip to the finish line in downtown Bangor, with 258 boats finishing.

My husband has completed the Kenduskaeg race several times, but myself— a beginner kayaker and with experience canoeing only in slow-moving waters— I'm not quite ready for the challenge. I am banking my hopes on my daughter; at almost 3 years old, she watched the race from the bridge with as much excitement as anyone there, leaning far over the railing with my arms crossed tight around her chest, to keep her eyes on every canoeist and kayaker that was passing by. She loved the colors, the shouts and cheers, the intense looks of excitement and determination on the faces of those in the race. After watching a young father-daughter team portage and re-enter the water, I asked her if she wanted to race one day with her Dad, and her eyes shone as she nodded earnestly. She loves the Penobscot River near our home, and I am happy to bring her out to these events, to show her how many ways there are to appreciate and enjoy our waterways, to make this part of her memory and part of who she becomes.

One of the exciting aspects of the Penobscot River Restoration Project is the increase in opportunities that paddlers will have to enjoy the river in her many moods – from slow, lazy sections of water to wilder stretches that will be exposed with removal of the Great Works dam and Veazie dam. Those two areas of the Penobscot are expected to resemble the Basin Mills Rips section near downtown Orono, and may provide some exciting rapids for kayaking enthusiasts to test their skills. In Howland, the nature-like fish passageway that is planned along the left side of the impoundment, may offer additional challenges for white water kayakers. An analysis of the potential for development of a white water kayaking park in Old Town is also being planned. The beautiful stretch of the Penobscot between Howland and Indian Island will continue to attract paddlers from local communities and from “away,” and the exciting option of an unobstructed canoe trip from Old Town to tidewater will draw those seeking a longer trip – one that hasn't been possible for nearly two hundred years.

While I may not join in the fun of the more challenging whitewater opportunities, I will relish watching from the shoreline as the river is celebrated for the many benefits it offers all of us. During the spring, I will continue to bring my daughter to share in the excitement of events like the Kenduskaeg race and the discoveries that happen on slow walks along the Penobscot River's edge as life unfolds again. Her delight in the river and being out on the water with her Mom and Dad can only grow, and it is a wondrous thing to witness how the river, her home, is weaving itself into her soul.

~ Cheryl Daigle, Penobscot River Restoration Trust



(Left and middle photos by Joe Dana)

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