



Encounters with the Wild

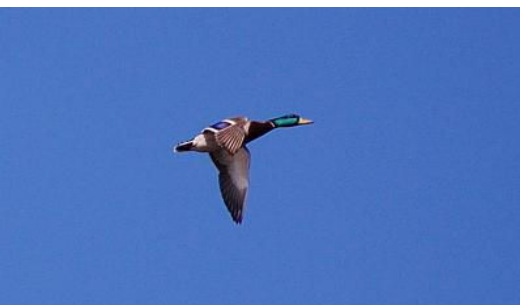
Penobscot River

Early Spring Paddling on Pushaw Stream

by Cheryl Daigle, April 2008

At a boat landing provided by the Hirundo Wildlife Refuge on Pushaw Stream in Old Town, my husband and I prepare for our second paddling trip of the year. Our daughter, Wren, is in front of the truck, fighting a bit of a cold but gamely ready to join us in the canoe. There is rough water coursing toward the landing from under the bridge, but we will only have a few moments of fast water before we reach a slow stretch of the stream as it wends its way toward Pushaw Lake. The water is so high that vast areas of woodland are flooded. Grey stalks of trees bearing patches of green lichen and the hint of color at twig tips offer a mysterious landscape of twists and turns to tempt us. In the past week or so I've seen both common and hooded mergansers, goldeneyes on their way north to breeding grounds, and other waterbirds flying overhead, and I am curious about what we may find here. For now, we stay in the mainstem, scaring up the occasional mallard and other unidentified waterfowl, happy to be out on the water and keeping an eye out for a patch of high ground where we can unpack a picnic lunch and explore the stream's edge.

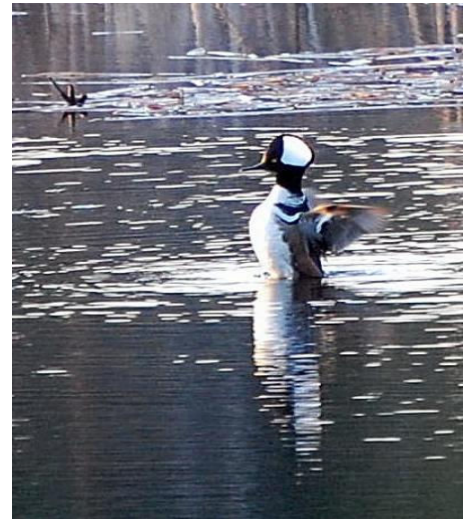
The last time I was out on Pushaw Stream during the springtime, I was just under 7 months pregnant with Wren. The water was high, like today, and there were few places to get out of the canoe for a break. The blossoms on the trees were a bit further along, and more insects were winding their way around us, but nothing biting. We came upon an old beaver dam that was sturdy enough to easily support the weight of myself and my husband. We sat quietly in the solitude, listening to the leaves rustling, watching the pulse of the water flowing by, and enjoying a snack of water and chips. Every once in a while I could feel the turn and poke of the baby, and I would press my hands against my belly and marvel at the life emerging around me and the life growing within. Without any warning, a bit of a tremble shook some of the branches of the dam, and a series of mews could be heard through the layers of mud and stick pressed beneath us. My husband and I looked at each other with widened eyes, and sat very still. A louder, purring type sound was next heard, and the mews increased in intensity. We didn't know if the creatures were beaver or muskrat or what, but it was obvious that mother was home, and it was time for us to go.



Now, my daughter is almost five, and seems to be taking well to being a native Mainer and impromptu paddling trips. She sits on a log with a checkered fishing cap on her head, windbreaker a bit askew, and eats an apple with intense concentration. The spot we've chosen to picnic on this time is quintessential Maine forest edging stream: paper birch, cedar, balsam fir and spruce trees reaching toward the water, tall thin stalks of moss poking out of remaining patches of snow, and bearded lichen and reindeer moss tucked in cracks and crevasses in the bark of the trees. Speckled alder shoots and

elders are covered in a foot of water where we left our canoe. The dead remains of trees sport holes driven by pileated woodpeckers, and we can hear a smaller species of woodpecker in the distance, with two chickadees chattering in a nearby maple tree that leans precariously out over the stream. A muskrat sits on a log about a hundred feet away, barely visible behind the twigs and stems of young trees. An old woods road is close by, and we can hear roosters and a cow in the distance. We point out all the different signs of spring while Wren chomps away on her apple, taking it all in. Sometimes it seems like she doesn't listen to a thing, but we know hours or days later she will surprise us with one fact or another that we've passed her way.

In the years between my daughter's birth and today, I joined the many people at work on the Penobscot River Restoration Project. Pushaw Stream, like many other tributaries of the Penobscot River, will see many benefits from our efforts to restore healthy populations of sea-run fish back into the watershed. With the return of alewives in the mid- to late spring, mergansers, kingfishers, and other fish-eating birds along with mammals such as river otter will have an abundant food source as they nest and raise young. Juvenile alewives in the system will provide easy food for fledgling animals to catch as they reach toward independence. Marine nutrients brought up the river with all species of sea-run fish will be carried into the smaller streams, increasing nutrient levels for insects, freshwater fish, waterbirds, and the many species of wildlife that rely on these waters and the forage base—whether plant or animal – that the waters contain. I can't help but think of this future whenever I am out on the water, and my daughter serves as a frequent reminder of what is at stake in our stewardship of this place where we live.



Our picnic finished, we make our way back to the truck lazily, choosing to paddle around the trees flooded by high water in hopes of seeing more ducks. We will return to streams like this and the river many times throughout the seasons. Wren watches each year with more interest as the landscape changes around her, and becomes a more active participant – helping to pack or tie up the canoe and insisting on paddling every chance she can get. She speaks of Mother Earth now, and

wonders aloud why someone would leave empty bottles and cans in the woods or floating on the water, exclaims "that person must not be Mother Earth's friend." She remembers clearly the time we visited the fish ladder at Damariscotta Mills, and she taped a photo of the alewife migration above her bed. The life in these waters are embedded in her memory, and it is exciting to think of what she may find here a decade from now – fully expecting that with completion of the Penobscot River Restoration Project, she will enjoy more frequent wildlife sightings, good fishing throughout the year, and many memorable paddling excursions in quiet waters and those that offer a bit more challenge in the rush and frenzy of spring.

