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Branches over Ripples: A Waterside Journal

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from *Branches over Ripples: A
Waterside Journal*

by

Brian Bartlett



Branches Over Ripples: A Waterside Journal is a fifty-entry *plein-air* writing project drafted between April 2013 and October 2014 by various bodies of water—rivers, brooks, lakes, bays, marshes, waterfalls, a vernal pond, a Japanese koi pond. Most of the writing was done in Nova Scotia locations, but some entries were drafted in New Brunswick, Montreal, Missouri, Manhattan, and London, England. I often walked from an hour to four or five hours, then sat down on bare earth, grass, sand, stone, or wood, and wrote, keeping attuned to my surroundings but also letting my mind and memory wander.

#33

May 18 Sunday 1:17 p.m.

Borden Brook

Blomidon Provincial Park

Kings County NS

Uninterrupted sounds of the brook falling & breaking over rocks, tumbling over itself, dominate the air, but aren't loud enough to hide the voices of all birds. The sunlight is hot on face & arms, so I'll likely need to change position before long, to find shade & avoid a variation on the sunburn I got yesterday merely by reading for an hour in the backyard. At the end of the North Mountain range, in the homeland of Glooscap—who they say created our species from an ash tree & put the tides of Fundy & Minas Basin into motion—this Sunday has already featured the not-quite-brook-drowned voices of Black-throated Green Warblers with their buzzy *zees*, a Winter Wren with its stunningly speedy tumble of high-pitched notes, & several Ovenbirds chanting their familiar *teacher-teacher-teacher*. For decades I've known that Ovenbirds are warblers that usually stick close to the forest floor, but thanks to this morning's field trip with the Blomidon Naturalists Society I've also just learned that ground-loving warblers tend to have louder voices than ones favouring tree branches, & that in the spring male Ovenbirds call from the mid-range of forest canopies, to increase the chances of their territorial & mating messages being heard.

Five minutes farther up the brook: now, at my back, a thick padding of moss coating a

rock, rather than the bare-rock backing for the previous paragraph. Partial shade, a cooler spot. A Parula Warbler sings high in the trees; a Cabbage Butterfly staggers through the air. With this year's spring as much as two weeks behind typical patterns, no flowers are blossoming near this spot just off Borden Brook Trail. But on Joudrey Trail, in the company of over thirty field-trip participants covering three or four generations, a few blossoms were around. Though the flowers of *Clintonia* aren't yet visible within the masses of their glossy leaves, & Wild Leek cover sections of the forest floor but without blossoms, we admired the cupped white blossoms of Hobblebushes, a few dozen Spring Beauties with their white petals lightly streaked with pink, & many Red Trilliums. The trilliums' burgundy, the boldest colour in sight, sent my mind wandering off to Caravaggio's paintings and back. If he visited here from the 1500s, would the Italian painter stoop to the Trilliums & feel a kinship with effects of light & shadow upon the burgundy petals? He must've considered at some point that forests achieved chiaroscuro eons before any painter was born.

By the brook here dead leaves are everywhere—winter-paled, hole-riddled, twisted. This morning's trip leader, Jim Wolford—long-retired Acadia University Biology prof & many-branched naturalist—said of a large stretch of wildly criss-crossed fallen trees, "It might look like a mess, but it isn't." His words made me wonder if any poet has written "In Praise of Deadfall." Likewise, all these nutrient-rich dead leaves aren't garbage to be swept away. Lives feed on the dead leaves & the deadfall; in sync with old stumps known as nurse stumps, the leaves here might be called nurse leaves.

Black flies don't seem to be up & about today, though Jim vividly reported that elsewhere in Kings County yesterday "there were so many you couldn't breathe—but they

weren't biting." For many of us, it was "a lesson in biodiversity" (Jim's phrase) to hear that there are 60 or 70 kinds of "black flies," but only a handful of them bite. & until today I'd not known that among many kinds of leeches on the planet only a few feed on blood. So "black flies" & "leeches," the way the words are thrown around, are reductive labels & greatly oversimplify natural variety. If you dipped into hefty books about insects or plants or birds every day, or, better, were guided in the field by experts in those fields, surely you could pick up daily lessons in biodiversity as long as you had a heartbeat & breath. *Biodiversity*: the term is so widely distributed by now, yet I can remember first encountering it back in the early 1990s while working on an essay about Tim Lilburn's *Moosewood Sandhills*, poetry immersed in the varieties of life in a grassy, shrubby region of Saskatchewan. By now the word has become so well-known it's taken on the qualities of cliché. Our ears & imaginations might hanker for a fresher word, but what is more helpfully pithy, more concentrated despite its connotations of breadth and variety? The long *i* and long *o* of *bio*, the short *i* of *div*, the percussive *b* & *d* & *t*, the liquid *s*, the concluding long *e*. Say the word slowly enough & it might sound & feel new again.

Nearly 2:30. A mid-afternoon lull has settled in, as if the Parula & other warblers, as well as sparrows & woodpeckers, were having siestas, or at least pausing in their food searches. (No sooner do I say that than a broken, vague bird-cry cuts through the constant flow of brookwater.) Today's field trip was advertised as a "Fairy Shrimp Walk," because one species of freshwater Fairy Shrimp—*Eubbranchipus intricatus*—was discovered for the first time in Atlantic Canada as recently as 1988 in the vernal pond thirty of us gathered by this morning. It's been located in Quebec & is common from Manitoba to the West Coast, but in the past 25 years it's been found nowhere east of Quebec except, nearly every spring, by the Blomidon Park vernal

pond, & at least once in a spot elsewhere in Kings County. Another lesson in variety: I'd always thought shrimp were found only in ocean water, so it's felt world-widening to hear that most Fairy Shrimps live in fresh water, & that the kind known as Brine Shrimp, *Artemia salina*, are found in hyper-saline lakes on several continents. From a print-out of information Jim e-mailed yesterday to potential field-trip participants, this: "Both sexes swim on their backs, 'upside down' to us, and their multiple pairs of thoracic appendages are constantly beating very rapidly, which is triply functional in being for swimming, for aeration via gills on those appendages, and for feeding mainly on single-celled green algae."

Last year Jim found no Fairy Shrimp by the vernal pond because, he figures, he may have visited the site a week or two after the shrimp had finished their egg-laying &, as happens once the next generation is set up, died. This morning he walked into the murky, shallow pond a few times with a long-handled net & carried caught items over to two basins resting atop upside-down plastic pails. Before long he suspected that with a prolonged winter only recently behind us, today the checking for the rare species might've been too early. Fairy Shrimp Walk yielded no Fairy Shrimp. I intended to ask why the species includes "Fairy" in its name, but forgot to. If the name tries to evoke something evanescent- or magical-looking about the species, then you might say the creature was doubly elusive today, like the ghost of a fairy. As for the Latin *Eubranchips intricatus*, the second part of the name is especially striking. What species, after all, doesn't deserve to be known for its complexity? Could we have ended up *Homo intricatus*?

The basins of pond water revealed other kinds of life (time to look over my ragged on-the-spot notes):

—the red dots of Watermites like smudged beads of blood

- Waterfleas (in truth minuscule crustaceans, not fleas)
- Flatworms (unsegmented)
- Caddisfly larvae (with protective casings they make from their own saliva combined with pebbles & twig bits)
- tadpoles (maybe of Wood Frogs)
- a yellowish sack of Yellow-spotted Salamander eggs (the “milky envelopes” around the eggs, Jim said, not found around any frog’s eggs)
- Mosquito larvae (“Good God,” I thought, “do they look that different from greatly magnified images of human sperm wiggling their tiny tails?”)

For some of us drawn to the colours, gracefulness, and speed of dragonflies, one of today’s most provocative sights was that of a dragonfly larvae, which an unformed eye might’ve hastily mistaken for some sort of beetle. An insect expert named Murray told a few of us that dragonfly larvae “breathe through their anus” & can survive five or six years before they develop wings. If asked how long dragonflies live, I might’ve guessed a few months, so it was another world-widening moment (“world-widening” as apt & less familiar than “eye-opening”) to learn that dragonflies can have a life-span of years.

That siesta was short-lived. Small warblers’ buzzes & trills—I’m too thinly familiar with some species’ voices—are sounding from the forest on both sides of the brook. It seems both appropriate & amusing, after Jim’s easygoing teaching & today’s lessons in minutiae, that I’m now again hearing an Ovenbird’s *teacher-teacher-teacher*. If we’d found Fairy Shrimp, maybe that species would hang around in recollections of today longer than anything else—but it won’t be disappointing to drive the ninety minutes back to Halifax after being imprinted with

sights of Spring Beauties, Watermites, Salamander eggs, Hobblebushes, dragonfly larva, Wild Leeks. At this spot on the banks of Borden Brook, the naked eye finds it hard to detect patterns of regularity amidst the accumulation of things—dead leaves, broken branches & twigs, bent or fallen trees, unsystematic stretches of detaching bark, patches of moss, quarter-size spots of grey lichen on rocks, big rocks pell-mell in the shallow, falling brook, the full length of ferns hugging the ground as if they're not drawn toward sunlight. Yet nearby there must be kinds of symmetry comparable to that experienced one moment this morning while gazing at three Red Trilliums in a triangle: the eye moving inward noticed each of the three flowers with three leaves, three burgundy petals, three pale bracts—then, moving outward, three bracts, three petals, three leaves, three trilliums. In the book of days I published early this spring, on one page did I write the phrase “symmetries & asymmetries”? I seem to recall it, but can't be positive if it's among the 366 round-the-year entries. If the book does say “symmetries & asymmetries,” should I repeat those words here? Nature is so full of repetitions—is that a reason for a nature-curious writer to be repetitious?

#27

August 31 Saturday 1:32 p.m.

Birch Road Vernal Pond

Point Pleasant Park

Halifax

A Meadowhawk dragonfly landed on this page, just after I'd written down the date, time & place. A shock of bright red against pale lined paper—then it was gone. About twenty other Meadowhawks are erratically flying a foot or two above the shallow water, landing on logs, hovering for a moment. Several species of red Meadowhawks are in eastern North America, some indistinguishable “in the field.” Are these ones Ruby Meadowhawks? They're true vermilion, unlike the reddish Red Squirrel behind my back. The squirrel has been whistling & cheeping—yes, squirrels “cheep” as much as some small birds—as if annoyed that I blundered into its kitchen or bedroom. At first it was silent except for the scratching & digging of its claws moving up & down a tree-trunk; without the squirrel's voice engaged, I turned around to find out what was making sharp sounds in the bark. The only other insects I've noticed are a few pale brown dragonflies—likely the females & immatures of the red male Meadowhawks—& ants: I'd made a back-support against a fallen tree, broken off pointed branch-stubs & settled against curved smooth wood, then ants began to bite; so I moved about 15' farther along the rotted log, & now sit on top of it rather than against it, but still close to the leafmulch & the rhizosphere.

Vernal ponds or pools (also known as “ephemeral pools,” though I've never heard anyone use that term aloud) (another Meadowhawk—or the same one?—just landed on this page, again only for moment) are bodies of water that emerge with spring run-off &, without outlet or inlet, dry up at some point in the summer. But Birch Road Vernal Pond still shines, September 1st less than twenty-four hours away. With hipwaders or even just high rubber-boots you could probably walk through the brown water in any direction & not sink up to your middle (unless the pond-bottom starts with a foot or two of spongy decayed & decaying matter). Another characteristic of vernal ponds is the absence of fish, a selling-card for insects & amphibians that fish prey upon. For the sakes of larvae, doesn't it seem good & just that such a thing as vernal pools—nurseries with a reduced population of predators—exist? I did walk around much of this pool, peering into the water to see if any minnows or other fish were there, but none flicked past underwater. After a wet spring, we've had a dry July & August, so it's surprising the pool here hasn't turned into an opening of fallen branches, tree stumps, bushes, mud & leafmulch. Since I don't visit Point Pleasant more than five or six times a year, I need to ask a South End naturalist or a faithful dog-walker what changes they've noticed in this vernal pond over the years, & whether it dried up in 2012, or '11, or '10.

Ten minutes ago a Meadowhawk landed on my bare left knee &, having positioned itself between the two metal bars of my leg-brace, rested there longer than the earlier dragonflies had on the journal page. For ten or twelve seconds I could see close-up not just its red abdomen but also the single black spots (stigma) on the upper outside corners of its four wings, & the furry texture of its thorax. Transparent, featherless insect-wings are so different from bird wings that you could argue we should have different words for them—except they both

facilitate flight. For the first time I noticed, to the left of a purple bruise, a small red spot on my knee, hardly bigger than a pin-head, of a colour very similar to the Meadowhawk's red. They say that dragonflies, except for great reductions in size, haven't changed much in 300,000,000 years. How young we are, the species with field-guides, the species with microscopes, rocketships, braille, heart transplants, & Pay at the Pump!

The sequence of birds I've heard over the past half hour is likely original in my experience. As I wrote in this journal months ago, such sequences can help give a day its uniqueness, a uniqueness easily unnoticed or unappreciated. For a long time today the only bird I saw was a Black Duck, & the only sounds it made were slight sloppings of water. At one point it lifted itself out of the water & began walking through the grasses & leafmulch toward me, then it turned around & retraced its steps. Now & then I've noticed it floating here & there, not quacking, not eating, not bathing itself or lifting its wings for another reason. After a while I felt a sort of kinship with it: dozens of Meadowhawks & hundreds of ants, but just one duck & one human at a vernal pond.

Then in quick succession I heard a Raven's hollow *tock* sounds & a Crow's caws: had Raven & Crow any reason to call to each other, or were they in separate spheres of awareness, not even conscious of each other? More recently, about fifteen minutes ago, two Mourning Doves moved among branches in the trees on the other side of the pond. No once did they make the cooing sounds once upon a time gave them their names. What the air carried was their wings' whistling; the white edges of their fanned tails flashed as they flew. (A minute before writing that sentence, I heard a dove's wing-whistling again, but from farther in the distance.) Then as I watched the Black Duck through binoculars—having seen it swimming &

walking but not flying, & considering the limitations of the site, I'd begin to wonder if it were wounded—a second Black Duck moved into the binoculars' range. Within minutes the first duck proved to be in fine shape: the two took off & exited together, their wings making a whistling sound lower-pitched than the doves'. (If human hearing were dozens of times sharper than it is, would someone write *A Field Guide to Wing-sounds*?)

During a walk around the park earlier this afternoon I passed the entrance to Shakespeare by the Sea's outdoor location, just ten minutes before today's matinee of *Snow White* started. A few evenings ago Karen & I got to *Hamlet*. What a contrast between the two stories: in one, a prince encounters seven dwarfs, defeats a witch, & gives the beautiful woman the kiss that restores her from poisoning; in the other, a prince swears revenge for his murdered father, feigns madness, talks a lot, kills his girl friend's dad, & dies from a poisoned sword-tip. Summer after summer, Shakespeare by the Sea's staging their performances among the military ruins of Cambridge Battery seems a noble transformation—like beating swords into ploughshares & spears into pruning-hooks; even if the plays end in swordfights & multiple deaths, Shakespeare's language & understanding have redemptive qualities, exceptional exactness, a respect for the unfathomable. This forest is a suitable location for seeing Ophelia offer rosemary ("for remembrance"), pansies ("for thought"), fennel, columbine, rue & violets; & for hearing Hamlet—for whom "the good frame, the earth...seems a stale promontory"—celebrate "this brave o'erhanging firmament, this magesterial roof fretted with gold fire," even if "it appears nothing to me but a foul & pestilential congregation of vapors" (how much in hearing or speaking the lines do we emphasize *appeared & to me*?) On today's walk it wasn't hard to imagine a few changes in the play: Ophelia offering the flowers I encountered (Wild

Mustard, Swamp Candles, Goldenrod, Yellow Hawkweed), & Hamlet seeing in this vernal pond an image of depletion, shrinkage, rot & emptiness. Yet if in his embittered, tormented state of mind Hamlet could've constructed here a metaphor for a sick court & society, in one of his Romances Shakespeare could've found a place of fertility, a glorious breeding-ground for frogs & dragonflies, a site of annual resurrection in the spring.

Other than a few notes on *Hamlet*, I've brought along a brief book of excerpts from Thoreau's journals, a recent publication includes over two dozen new engravings by Abigail Rorer. Making no concessions to lazy conceptions of beauty, or to stereotypes of what does & doesn't make a catchy title, the book is called *Of Woodland Pools, Spring-Holes & Ditches*. Did the publisher object? Did the editors put up a good fight for the appealingly homely title? I've not yet read the selections but notice on the dust jacket that "vernal pool" wasn't a term in Thoreau's time; & that the book's excerpts only derive from the months of March, April & May (did Thoreau never write about vernal ponds later in the year, once they'd dried up?)

Looking into the future, I've decided two things in the past hour: I'll reach the Counterpoint Press volume of Thoreau's vernal-pond writings before next spring, & in April or May I'll return here—maybe to this very spot—for another couple of hours with the journal. Thinking ahead to 2014, I've recently decided to revise earlier "By the Waters..." plans to situate each entry in a different location, never to write twice in the same site; instead this experiment will be open to the possibility of writing in the same place in different seasons. Surely Birch Road Vernal Pond deserves a return visit. I need to come back here next spring or early summer, when the pond will likely be deeper, spring warblers back before the deciduous trees are thickly leaved, amphibians' eggs visible in the shadows (on the last day of August, I've

not seen one frog or salamander.)

Far larger than Meadowhawks, a few Darners (there are many species of Darners) have also been zipping around the pond. Could they easily be renamed Darters? In their agitated, blurred flight, at a distance they sometimes seem as bulky as Hawk-moths, even when you know they're much slimmer. In other summers & other locations I've managed to photograph Darners, but this summer they've always kept their distance & remained elusive when I've spotted them. If I sat here long enough, even through the rest of this afternoon & through all of tomorrow's daylight & even Monday's (crazy exercise for the Labor Day weekend!), would one of them eventually land on my knapsack, page, or bare knee? Or do different kinds of dragonflies manifest different degrees of willingness to approach resting humans, & would a Darner never settle on my skin for a few seconds? There are more things about dragonflies & vernal ponds, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

About 15' from this log, a Black Duck, maybe one of the two earlier ones, swims about very close to shore, dipping its bill into the water, brown water without a trace of blue. Earlier today I saw a woman reaching into branches along one of the park roads, & heard her say to her dog, "A goldmine of blackberries!" Maybe the duck here has found a goldmine of edibles in the swampy water.

BRIAN BARTLETT has published many books of poetry, including *The Watchmaker's Table*, *The Afterlife of Trees*, and *Wanting the Day: Selected Poems*. He teaches creative writing at St. Mary's University.

To see more of Bartlett's work in *The Goose* go to

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