

# Apace

*Dog Walking, Kinaesthetic  
Empathy, and Posthuman  
Ethos in the Great North Woods*

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**Abstract:** Researching nonfiction writing about where you call home is one way of appreciating conservation challenges. Living at the edge of the Great North Woods in Maine, I have found this work to be enriched by daily dog walks that cumulatively mark changes across time. Structured as a seasonal cycle, this essay ponders an idiosyncratic collection of evidence of more-than-human comings and goings, witnessed on two feet, accompanied by four more, in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. By writing about encounters with wildlife at close range, I reflect on specific ways in which my reading and dog walking practices together inspire extensions of empathy toward the ineffable relations that structure nature–culture borderlands. Becoming attuned to the critters within and without, betwixt and between house and home through extensions of kinaesthetic empathy, my hope is to model the development of a posthuman ethos through developing a storied appreciation for the elusive, unnamed intimacies of nonhuman neighbourliness that include, but are not limited to, witnessing dying and death.

**Keywords:** *Maine; Great North Woods; dog walking; canine–human relations; ecocriticism; kinaesthetic empathy; nonhuman nonstandard intimacy; posthuman ethos*

**Bio:** Susan McHugh, Professor of English at the University of New England, USA, researches and teaches literary, visual, and scientific narratives of cross-species relations. She is the author of three monographs: *Dog* (2004), *Animal Stories: Narrating Across Species Lines* (2011), and *Love in a Time of Slaughters: Human-Animal Stories against Genocide and Extinction* (2019). She has coedited several academic volumes, including *Posthumanism in Art and Science: A Reader* (2021) and *Animal Satire* (2023). McHugh serves as co-editor of two book series, *Palgrave Studies in Animals and Literature* and *Plants and Animals: Interdisciplinary Approaches*. She is Editor-in-Chief of the interdisciplinary academic journal *Society & Animals*.

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“Yesterday was my seventy-fifth birthday,” my neighbour announced, “So I walked all the way from here to my daughter’s house, almost thirty-six miles.”

What could I say? “Congratulations, dear! You’re an inspiration.”

“Me? No. You’re the inspiration. Out here every day, walking your doggie.”

My neighbour’s point was not to brag on himself. He’s a humble fellow, like most people who have spent their whole lives here in Maine, at the edge of the Great North Woods. No, he was calling me out as a compulsive dog-walker. It’s not just next door who notices. In the public library, on the roadside, in shops, really all around the area, Mainers see me for what I am.

“You’re that woman out all hours with the dog,” I’m told. If they’re old-timers, then it’s “the one who was always walking that big black dog.” I may not get very far through snow, sleet, freezing rain, sunny heat, and especially gloom of night. Sometimes my human partner makes us three. But every day out I go, leashed to our dog. Our love for each other and our world grows apace.

On a good day, our so-called empty walks for canine comfort can stretch on for hours, during which we gather news about fellow travellers. Our dog’s data collection requires long inhalations, giving me plenty of opportunities to check my own perceptions. Largely self-confined to my own little dog-centred world, I am alternately startled, saddened, thrilled, and profoundly humbled by what daily, dog-induced observations teach me about forces larger than all of us.

Structured as a seasonal cycle, this essay ponders an idiosyncratic collection of evidence of more-than-human comings and goings, witnessed on two feet, accompanied by four more, in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. I am inspired by my friend Kenneth J. Shapiro’s concept of kinaesthetic empathy extended across species lines, a phenomenological approach to studying nonhuman life that accounts for the investigator’s own potentials for embodied mobility. Shapiro developed his method through attunement to

his own yard dog in rural Maine: watching his watch dog, who was also watching being watched, Shapiro realized that he was becoming simpatico with the dog's interests and needs.<sup>1</sup> Expanding the application of kinaesthetic empathy to daily dog walking likewise implicates me as a participant-observer. Often, I follow the dog's interests to take a different direction from my own inclination, making way for the development of a posthuman ethos. Moving together away from a static self, we enter a zone that is not centred on human perception, and so make way for storying appreciation for the elusive, unnamed intimacies of nonhuman neighbourliness.

Poet Robert Frost captured the human ethos of our New England region with the lines in "Mending Wall" about good fences making good neighbours. The stone walls around here have long since slid into disrepair, whether by the geological forces, elves, and hunters' hands implied by Frost himself, or by the bulldozers, skidders, and thieves' hands doing the damage closer to my home. What remains is proof of the gist of the poem: that something in nature doesn't like or love walls, and that neighbourliness isn't always about goodness.

For ecocritics, badness gains new appeal through Nicole Seymour's diagnosis of the problems of extremism in the naturalist tradition. Whether emphasizing gloom-and-doom or giddy-kiddie visions, longstanding nature-story patterns privilege and secure the pure and sanctimonious, all too often at the expense of others, as Seymour argues in *Bad Environmentalism*.<sup>2</sup> For me, writing about dog walking close to home foregrounds the challenges of self-reflexivity in embracing the queer and diverse, the unexpected and unforgettable, even the messy and gross realities of life and death across species lines. I learn a lot that is not overtly taught, not least how essential nonhuman companionship becomes to the social life of an introvert.

Yet, you wonder, who is our dog? Somewhat confusingly, "our dog" anchors my experience of living with another human and a sequence

1 Shapiro, "Understanding Dogs", 194.

2 Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, 3-4

of two dogs, first Sabena and now Brunhilde. The dogs never knew each other, yet both have been my near-constant companions and kept my academic work relevant. Walking with Sabena helped me to begin to theorize a tradition of feminist dog writing that I later identified with liberatory and even life-saving potentials. But it is the practice itself that persists in my life after Sabena, with Brunhilde, that inspires me here to review all of the raw data as a means of mapping something much bigger than any of us as individuals: an emerging sensibility of the convergence of dog ownership and walking into a shared, complex, and emergent posthumanist practice of environmental responsiveness.

My influences include contemporary dog writers across genres and disciplines such as Deborah Bird Rose, Colin Dayan, Donna Haraway, Laura Jean McKay, and Justyna Włodarczyk, whose work provides abundant justification for positioning everyday canine-human relations as entangled in broader cultural discourses, and whose kindness and generosity in interpersonal communications has been positively inspirational. Together they inform my sense of a posthuman ethos that necessarily acknowledges — whether by speaking to, correcting, or writing towards — the foundational gaps between the human and other animals, even humanity's best friend.

There's no denying that walking with a large dog provides more than a semblance of security to an absent-minded professor who presents as female. To those who dismiss my attachment to the leash as purely selfish or cruelly domineering, I counter that protection goes both ways. Family dog walks in the many parks and public lands in central Massachusetts are among my fondest of childhood memories. Seeing one of our off-leash dogs kill a porcupine is one of the most traumatic. The dog lived because our veterinarian miraculously removed all of the quills, only after a long ride there, while we struggled to keep the dog from bashing his head against the car windows in utter agony. Other dogs of my childhood had their skulls smashed in abandoned leg-hold traps, were shot by game wardens, and became roadkill. Given the choice, I keep dogs close.



**Fig. 1**

Zoomies.

Photo by Mik Morrisey © 2023.

No more than four miles or so in diameter, the narrow range of our dog walks spotlights different flourishings and vanishings in our locale. Although covering very little territory, we traverse varied terrain, starting up on the granite-ledge ridge where our house sits, down into the valleys below, but never quite over or beyond the next ridges. Commercial apple orchards are planted along much of our street, and a few hayfields edged with stone walls remain from the days when the human neighbours would all have been farm families. But most of the land has grown back into woodlands, mixed hardwoods, and evergreens, with vernal pools, year-round swamps, and streams. In the bottom of the valley to the east, a fair-sized brook feeds a giant glacial pond, all draining toward the Androscoggin River, which eventually meets the Atlantic Ocean.

Sometimes the Atlantic feels very close. Although we are thirty miles inland, as the crow flies, the air can smell of salt when there is a stiff breeze coming up the river valley, or in the humid stillness that precedes a thunderstorm.

On the ridge with the steepest drop, a tiny commercial Alpine ski area miraculously persists, despite steady regional declines in annual snowfall. Its network of wooded glades and open runs bleeds into even more extensive Nordic ski, snowmobile, and fat-bike trail systems that, for most of the year, dog and I have to ourselves. This land, like most of Maine, is privately owned, but the landowners allow access to the public.

It is an evolving situation that has its problems, no doubt about it. In a recent chance conversation with another neighbour—him cross-country skiing alone, me snowshoeing with dog, with the whoops and giggles of a busy day at the ski area providing background noise—I found myself agreeing that there is nowhere else on earth that we'd rather live. Because he's the president and I'm a board member of our community's Nordic ski association, we also share concerns about what the future holds. As someone whose day job is reading, researching, and teaching literary, visual, and scientific narratives of cross-species relations, I can't help but collect stories, and notice changes.

## Autumn

Even if you've lived here all of your life, waking up to Maine's fall foliage season in full bloom can take your breath away. All it takes is a cool August night to light up a branch here, a tree there. Peak colour historically doesn't arrive until early October. But the new normal of prolonged summer droughts sets the swamp maples in the bottomlands in full cry before we get back into the habit of closing the windows at bedtime.

The most glorious of all, sugar maples are often to be found near the oldest houses. I learned while reading Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* that they are leftovers of the Victorian custom of planting them in pairs to mark the homes of newlyweds.<sup>3</sup> Many more maples fed syrup operations — such as the one that was credited with financing the story behind *Living the Good Life* for Scott and Helen Nearing, whose Maine estate is now the non-profit Good Life Center — but those large-scale ones have grown fewer and farther between throughout the region. Long before talk came of climate change, everyone my age and older remembers news reports portending sugar maple die-off as the result of acid rain, the atmospheric condensation of fossil-fuel pollution. For us, the few large specimens that remain are beacons for nostalgia, glowing in their autumnal glory.

The encroachments of a pale yellow on the foliage palette points to another factor: the displacement of natives by hardier, invasive Norway maples. The pathways of our dog walks are littered with less of the vivid orange, red, and mixed-colour leaves typical of swamp and sugar maples, and more of the Norway's uniformly yellow ones, often dotted with brown fungal infections called tar spots. Our dog likes them all the same, in our snapping-at-leaves-tossed-on-a-breeze games.

Contradictions cloak the autumn landscape. Morning mists are made glorious by the first frost to touch cinnamon ferns, plants that become most pungently themselves only when dying. Good rain years

3 Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 70





**Fig. 2**

Hunting Season.  
Photo by Mik Morrisey © 2023.

bring forth an abundance of chanterelles, black trumpets, and chicken-of-the-woods mushrooms. Apples galore, free for the filching, lull me into the story of fall as the season of bounty, abundance, and plenty. Puppy passions for eating apples are quickly outgrown, but catching and chasing play with “snackballs” returns each year with the ripening fruit, and ends when a hard freeze makes the apples rot.

Losses abound, too. By law, dogs and humans must don blaze orange throughout November, which is open season on deer, but we do so also in the months before and after. In surrounding towns, one woman was killed five years ago and another ten years earlier by hunters who thought they saw deer and lawfully opened fire. Wardrobe malfunctions can be serious safety concerns.

Despite the occasional gunshots, it is an absence, a quietude, that audibly marks the seasonal turning point. Late-life Maine resident Henry Beston’s bestseller *The Outermost House* was written on and about the same migratory flyway, only several generations ago and a fair bit south of here, on the great sand dunes of Cape Cod. Reading and teaching it heightened my appreciation for the gathering disappearance of birdsong that precedes the migrants’ annual departure.

Still, the silence becomes harder to hear. I follow the newspaper column of local ornithologist and retired biology professor Herb Wilson, full of names and numbers that indicate incrementally changing departure and arrival times for various songbird species accruing over my time here, along with steadily falling numbers for so many. Fortunately, it’s not all bad news.

Flocks of eastern bluebirds always appear astonishing, particularly when feeding on staghorn sumac berries, perching their mostly cobalt-blue bodies on bright red panicles that are three or four times their size. Old neighbours have pointed me to the nesting boxes they purpose-built to attract bluebirds, and explained that they add dried mealworms to their feeders to get them to stay. Wilson’s column confirms: though twentieth-century records indicate they were a rare sighting this far north, bluebird range has crept up this far in Maine.

One September morning, a bluebird flying up from and down to the same spot on the road drew me and our dog to a horrible sight: a smear of blue feathers and blood was all that was left. The grotesque tableau only grew worse by our afternoon walk, with the addition of the distraught mourner, also killed by a car. One man's meat is another's consternation, observed my spouse.<sup>4</sup> We are not just annoyed by the increasing traffic drawn to the corn maze, Fright Nights, and ever more attractions added to the commercial orchard. Our dog alerts me to ever more roadkill, and I've learned to carry a flashlight to alert approaching drivers to our own presence.

Municipal police are called to kill any deer injured in car crashes. If they're locals, they in turn call somebody who wants the meat to come and get it. The rest of the roadkill disappears in a matter of days without human help, carried off, whole or in bits, by scavengers and opportunists, one wild animal's flesh being another's food. Mast years for the oaks lead to notable upticks in squirrel and chipmunk carnage. I do my best to keep our distance, but even so will never forgive myself for hustling the dog by one bloodied grey squirrel, left lifeless except to blink.

For these reasons and more, our walks each autumn trend off these beaten tracks. Mowed well into the season, the orchards are an easy-walk option on days too windy, mucky, or otherwise uncondusive to being in the woods. The many deer paths threading through the large swaths of fields left to brambles entice the dog with their unmistakable pellet-like piles of poop. Regular dusk and dawn sightings of small groups explain why the same road crossings are dotted with dainty hoofprints. Deer do well here, at least in terms of numbers. But we share our troubles too.

4 In apparently coining this phrase, my spouse sounded so much like E.B. White (who moved to Maine before publishing his best-loved novel, *Charlotte's Web*) that I misremembered the origin. Hours of poring over what I thought was the source, White's essay collection *One Man's Meat*, I am rewarded instead with the famous author's description of local schoolchildren's preference for walking to hitching rides in cars: "Although I am motorized to a degree, I enjoy living among pedestrians who have an instinctive and habitual realization that there is more to a journey than the mere fact of arrival" (111), charmed to think that White is describing Maine children of the same generation as my walking-enthusiast neighbour, with whom I began this essay.

One unusually warm day, I turned a corner on one of the woods paths to startle a group of at least three, who bounded off before even the dog clocked that they were real. Onward we walked in their wake, only later realizing our mistake. Returned home, I gave up counting after picking the seventy-fifth deer tick off her. I don't even want to remember all the ones that I picked off myself, for ticks are vectors of Lyme disease, anaplasmosis, and many more debilitating and potentially deadly zoonoses.

## Winter

Years with the requisite two weeks of constant, below-freezing temperatures that keep tick populations at bay are becoming things of the past. The tick-prevention pills I force on our dog each month and the Lyme jab that she gets from the veterinarian each year are meant to keep us all safer. But nothing spares me and my kind from being responsible for the vanishing snowpack.

Each winter, our dog and I seem to travel farther and farther on frozen bare ground than we used to along snow-covered trails. The local snowmobile club maintains part of a network that could take us from our back door to Québec, in theory anyway. Until they rerouted their trails to avoid the pond altogether, their snow groomers arrived after the pond iced in. It used to be safe to assume it would stay solid for months, but weird thaws are the new norm. Ever-higher air temperature records might be expected so close to the Gulf of Maine, now known as the fastest-warming expanse of ocean on the planet.

When the snow falls deep, the groomers are a welcome sight, guaranteeing us a respite from the heavy work of breaking trail. Club leaders grumble about the dwindling spirit of volunteerism, but it is hard to attract new blood to a dying pastime. Snowmobiles and their riders now disappear under thin ice with such regularity that Maine enacted a law charging the cost of their removal to the owner, or their estate. Miscalculations can be deadly. Only once have I been stopped and quizzed by a game warden during a search for a snowmobiler gone missing, who was later found drowned in a pond in the next town over. That scared me off venturing onto pond ice anymore,

or letting our dog off leash on the beach until the pond is well iced out in spring.

With increasing regularity, the dog can drink from one or all of the streams we cross year-round. There and on the pond's edge the mud and snow sometimes record the distinctive hand- and footprints of raccoons, coming to fish or wash their food. One year, a long cold and clear snap between big snowstorms allowed us to track them back to a nest in an ancient, hollowed-out sugar maple, from inside which mom and her three kits blinked back at us in the dawn light. The tree came down a few years ago when the forest was logged. Although the family had long since flown that particular coop, we have not spotted another raccoon nursery. Their tracks confirm their persistence though, adding to the list of reasons that our dog stays leashed in the woods.

The waddling gait of porcupines leaves beautiful lines of perfectly symmetrical, curvy groove patterns in fresh snow. Like raccoons, they are nocturnal, rarely seen by us except in winter. Just about the same tiny size, oval shape, distribution, and colour of the cones that carpet the woods under hemlocks, porcupine poop pellets point us to where to look up in order to spy them in the overstory, curled up snoozing on cold sunny days. From below, they look like large fur balls, precariously perched along boughs way up in the largest trees that grow on the southeast side of the ridge, enjoying protection from predators along with strong winds. On the ground, the pee-dribbled trails they wear down in the snow thread together the shelter of big trees, underground hidey-holes, and visibly damaged younger trees where they feed on tender bark.

Dogs of all stripes are compelled to try to kill porcupines, and in turn can be killed when quills that aren't removed migrate into the dog's internal organs. Ordinarily, porcupines are keen to shimmy up trees, keeping well away from us. A few years back, our Nordic ski club issued an alert about one apparently blind, elderly porcupine, who lived another year despite bumping around everywhere at all hours. Somehow, I got the dog turned around quickly from every one of our close encounters.

After a heavy snowstorm marked by the kind of high winds that used to seem strange, but now knock down massive white pines like so many matchsticks almost every year, another porcupine was not so lucky. The storm was followed by a sunny Sunday that drew out an unusually large crowd of snowmobilers. From our snowshoe-blazed link trail to the house, we spied a bewildered porcupine pointlessly pacing in circles, betraying the signs of severe head injury. Was it blown out of a tree during the storm? Clipped by a snowmobile? Both? The porcupine disappeared after nightfall, easy pickings for fisher cats.

North America's largest weasels, fisher cats leave distinctive hopping pairs of footprints, roundish in front, oblongish in back, which each winter confirm their nightly hunts for smaller mammals. Dogs always want to check their movements. One early morning in deep snow, our extraordinarily excited dog announced that we were hot on someone's trail. It wasn't the sight so much as the distinctive pig-cat squeal-hiss that startled us to a screeching halt, gaping as the large fisher cat lolloped away. Over the years I have heard them again, even gotten into a long call-and-response exchange with a lovelorn individual one spring night, but never again set eyes on a fisher cat, dead or alive.

The tall white pine trees along our ridge are conducive to nesting ravens. There is always a flock around somewhere, and they have our number. Edgar Allen Poe chose one to star in his most famous poem precisely because, like parrots, they can plausibly repeat human words. But I have come to think that Poe also was treated to something of the prankster in them. First thing one morning, a pair of juveniles locked talons to propeller themselves toward me and the dog while we were still in the driveway, parting just inches before they hit the pavement. They flew away unscathed, all in good fun.

It was no fun, however, one winter day to see a flock mobbing an owl, taking turns hitting their increasingly unsteady target on a downward flight path. Owls similarly take any opportunity to kill ravens. The feel of a great horned owl swooping low overhead while

I skied the moonlit orchard quelled any doubts that they have the advantage after nightfall. But the strangest winter sight of all made it so that I see the largest of our corvids as ordinary (quoth Poe's raven) nevermore.

One February, hundreds upon hundreds of ravens gathered in and around an ancient white pine, their usual range of croaks, clicks, grocks, and other sharp vocalizations all given way to gentle murmuration. They crowded close, grooming each other or repeatedly turning over pieces of bark with their beaks. Days went by, and they lingered on in this manner, unperturbed by our comings and goings for dog walks. Then, as quickly as they gathered, they vanished.

In English, “an unkindness” is one of the collective nouns for ravens, but I distinctly prefer another, “a conspiracy of ravens”, after learning that what I witnessed was exceptionally rare roosting behaviour for ravens in the eastern United States, according to Bernd Heinrich's *Ravens in Winter* and *Mind of the Raven*.<sup>5</sup> In light of his many substantial scientific contributions to the understanding of wild raven behaviour, largely via his Maine field research station located several towns north of here, I was shocked to read Heinrich lamenting never having witnessed a ravens' congress.

Heinrich also gave me a new appreciation for orange cheese doodles, each of which has the same high fat content as a grasshopper. On particularly cold days, a few ravens know to choose perches where they catch my attention out the windows, and draw me out of the house to share the dubious human industrial achievement of fluorescent-orange crap-food extruded from a pipe. The ravens don't always take them, at least not while we are watching. Spotting an orange flash in a black bird's beak sometimes days, weeks, even months later, while out walking, confirms that ravens cache these treats.

5 For parallel descriptions relayed by Heinrich from other observers, see Heinrich, *Ravens in Winter*, 159–60; and Heinrich, *Mind of the Raven*, 24.



**Fig. 3**

On the Trail.  
Photo by Mik Morrisey © 2023.



## Spring

Spring becomes interesting when the snowpack lingers. Old-school gardeners take heed not to set out tender plants before our Memorial Day holiday on the last weekend in May, before which hard freezes are still possible, if also less probable. Known by locals as poor-man's fertilizer, the last snow falls more typically now in April, when peas, radishes, and hardy greens might be sprouting in the garden. Although March vies with February for the heaviest snowfall, strong nor'easters — which is what we call the storms that swirl back on a northeasterly gale from the Gulf of Maine — can bring deep snow late into spring, not only blanketing but also revealing the stirrings of new life.

One mid-March morning, a large doglike, except distinctly pigeon-toed track appeared on the main snowmobile trail up from the valley behind our house, laced around and across by smaller but otherwise identical prints. Consulting my dog-eared copy of Olaus Murie's *A Field Guide to Animal Tracks* confirmed it was a black bear sow, roused from denning with her new rambunctious cub. Several towns northwest of here and half a century ago, Louise Dickinson Rich wrote in her Maine memoir *We Took to the Woods* of being more concerned when coming across strange boot prints than spotting a bear's tracks.<sup>6</sup> I'd say the sentiment still rings true.

One person was killed by a great white shark off the Maine coast a couple of years ago, for the first time here in recorded history, but there has never yet been a fatal black bear attack. Still, caution is warranted. My joy at seeing this proof of their persistence was surpassed only by gratitude for their shyness, for our dog would not be so easily persuaded that getting between mother and cub is dangerous. Apart from scat in the orchard, the only other sign of bear life was a lone track in the snow down close to the pond, following a freakish thaw in January, when bears used to not be expected to be out and about.

6 Rich, *We Took to the Woods*, 91

Dog delights crop up in spring as well. A chance find of an antler during the shedding season can serve as a go-to chew toy throughout the year. Our native whitetail deer can grow quite large here. But a big buck's hoofprints may not be what they seem. Only by seeing their paths cross in low snow have I learned to distinguish the dragging-toe gait of moose from the crisp outlines of deer hooves. Unlike deer, moose have become more precious. Conversations with Maine hunters notoriously stop short with their line: a moose feeds a family of four for the winter. Especially away from wealthy coastal communities, subsistence requires traditional ecological knowledge and understanding.

Along with foraging, fishing, and running trap lines, hunting helps locals make ends meet, while maintaining heritage ties to the land and waterways. Their stories of harvesting moose these days frequently feature bony-looking adults covered in thousands of ticks, and carcasses of calves thus bled to starvation. Drive north, and it becomes easier to spot moose from the car. But here, I have only ever seen a moose on two occasions, thanks to dog walking.

When our current dog Brunhilde was a pup, she and I hadn't made it out of the driveway one fine daybreak before being rushed from behind by a large animal that to my bleary perception appeared to be the biggest, ugliest whitetail fawn ever. Pup meanwhile exchanged play bows with the baby beast, who then ran back behind the house before I woke up to what the big jug-head and pure-brown, spotless cape meant: a moose calf.

The sight of such an unlikely creature beggars the imagination. During breakfast, years earlier, I looked out the window and wondered why a strange horse was running across the neighbours' yard. The penny dropped; the toast fell out of my hand. Later I learned that, at about the same time, our dog was out walking downhill from the house with her other human, who confirmed their own sighting of the self-same moose, maybe just minutes before.

Both were seen in late May, by which time most of our winged travellers are back, their adult males robustly adding to a glorious daily

dawn chorus. A few years before I was born, later-in-life Maine resident Rachel Carson first sounded the alarms about the ecological fragility of the seasonal soundtrack in *Silent Spring*. I have no way of knowing how much quieter springtime has become here since then, but I feel seen as part of the problem when reading Carson's critique of "a world where a flea bites a dog, and dies because the dog's blood has been made poisonous," presumably by the same chemicals I feed mine to kill ticks.<sup>7</sup>

Dog heads swivel toward a particularly loud, shrill, or otherwise noticeably different birdsong, but identifying its source is another matter. In another memoir, *My Neck of the Woods*, Louise Dickinson Rich made a pact with her friend to learn one new species of bird each year "for the next fifty years, and die ornithologists,"<sup>8</sup> with the added practicality of being able to impress the friend's hotel guests from away. (In Maine, everyone agrees that you're either a Mainer, born here of people from here, or you're from away.) Reading that detail made me self-conscious that, at best, I have struggled to identify one new bird species each year, though not for lack of trying.

For years, I puzzled over the charismatic, black, white, and orange-yellow-patched flock that summered in the same disused hayfield near the pond — Evening grosbeaks? Some kind of oriole? Surely not one of the legions of yellow warbler species — before it clicked that their burbling banter, sounding like nothing so much as the ambient sound of the bridge of the old Starship *Enterprise*, inspired onomatopoeia: they are bobolinks, a species in steep decline throughout our region as a direct result of losing these tall-grass nesting areas. Our dog encourages my observations by needing to rest her hot belly on choice areas of muck, in that field where the water table runs high. We have learned to look out for new ways to cool off when the sun blazes. Daytime high temperatures keep breaking records, and long before the dog sheds her winter coat.

7 Carson, *Silent Spring*, 39.

8 Rich, *My Neck of the Woods*, 28.

Before the trees leaf in with welcome shade, the bare woods amplify the haunting calls of loons who summer every year on the pond, and thereby confirm when it has iced out. Our dog rejoices to swim again as soon as possible, but it's usually July before I can linger in the water comfortably. The sun sometimes warms the shallow sandy edge, but frosty feet are a small price to pay for canine amusement. A streamside path down to the pond is the most reliable place to spot spring ephemerals like trilliums, false heliotropes, ferns' fiddleheads unfurling, and, my favourite, the chartreuse plants locally called skunk cabbages for their low-lying, stinky flowers. Insects feeding on them make possible still more returns.

Usually, at the end of April or beginning of May, I can be counted on to exclaim aloud another regional moniker — peepers! — heralding the emergence of one of the earliest of our several species of singing frogs. Hearing them is a sure sign that winter is over. Their collective chorus builds up to a crescendo of evensong that can be downright deafening close to the water's edge. Quieter folk depend on these elusive bodies of water as well.

When rapid thaws and heavy rains turn the trails into a morass, our dog and I return to walking the roads in time to see and sometimes deter reptiles and amphibians from risking their lives to bask in the heat radiating from pavement. I am too clumsy and fearful to trust myself to handle snakes, so with the dog's help I try to shoo them back into hiding in the hedgerows and stonewalls that line the roadside, otherwise giving them a wide berth. Walking by where neighbours had just quit working on their stonewall one evening, I was startled by a yard-plus-long milk snake hunting whoever was thus exposed. I couldn't believe my eyes until I read Henry Beston's spouse Elizabeth Coatsworth's description of "the mistress" of a neighbouring household regularly encountering another humongous specimen "in the attic, where it had gone apparently ratting," I believe her when she says it was a habit for which they were especially welcomed in old Maine houses.<sup>9</sup>

9 Coatsworth, *Country Neighborhood*, 108

Snakes move along, but newts and salamanders usually freeze up instead at my gesticulations, so I have learned to scoop them into my pockets and walk them far off the road, begging our dog for calm so that I can deposit them somewhere safe. Sometimes they kick, but mostly they seem to bear the transport well.

A leaf stirring on an otherwise still early evening turned into my first sighting of an incredibly huge, ten-inch-long spotted salamander. In my incredulity, I simply followed it to a roadside wall. I doubled down on providing transport assistance after the dog's other human explained that, when he was fixing the stone wall in the woods behind the house, he immediately replaced a rock that covered a gathering of dozens of tiny newts. With the proliferation of Big Night events and information, all geared to galvanize public interest in these ever-more endangered species' propensities for road crossings on the first warm wet evening, I am learning ways to improve my do-gooding. Having washed my hands before leaving the house minimized my chances of contaminating with my own skin oils that last ice-cold bullfrog that I relocated to a neighbour's cow pond.

Springtime means rejoicing in cacophony, which we feed in different ways. I take the veil called a bug baffler throughout May because I'm allergic to black flies, often mockingly referred to as Maine's state bird. They help remind us that life in tropic times is challenging. Breeding relentlessly in the running water of late spring until summer heat makes them drowsy, they have the same biting-lapping mouthparts as related species like green-head, deer, and horse flies that chew bloody holes in our skin, also painful and itchy, just larger and later in summer. Most people only notice native mosquitoes after being bitten, but the invasive species in contrast are distinctly audible, sometimes so large that you can count the stripes on their backs. As Carson documented, their capacity to serve as disease vectors inspired the noxious spread of the chemical DDT, now banned as hazardous to healthy bodies and ecosystems.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Carson, *Silent Spring*, 114



**Figure 4**

Dogwalking II.  
Photo by Mik Morrissey © 2023.

Most unwelcome to me, however, are the European brown-tail moths, to which I am among the few who are highly allergic. Their caterpillars shed hairs bearing a toxin that burns like poison ivy, so understandably birds are reluctant to eat them. Scars remain on my skin from horribly itchy, raised welts that can take weeks to heal. The toxin persists up to three years on the caterpillars' microscopic hairs, raining down from infested treetops throughout late spring and swirling around on dry days throughout the year. After their population mysteriously crashed a century ago, they remained only where they first arrived, on the coast of Maine. Their move this far inland has been accelerated by severe droughts attributed to climate change along with their ability to pupate on humans' vehicles. Science has yet to identify the definitive reason why we're currently experiencing what may be a cyclical resurgence, but it's certainly a new reason to curtail walks on hot days.

## Summer

All summer long, we head for the pond, where all dogs appreciate long drinks, if not refreshing swims. They also can enjoy each other's off-leash company a few mornings a week at the community yacht club. On the club's floating docks, it is easier to spot different fishes along with the occasional turtles, ducks, and geese that hatch along the shore. One time we sat quietly as a curious loon approached, dove under, then surfaced close by, only on the other side. In their presence it is easy to forget loons' fragility, to recall instead Henry Thoreau's description in *Walden* of "perhaps the wildest of sounds that is ever heard here, making the woods ring far and wide," their "looning" sounding "more like a wolf than any bird."<sup>11</sup> We have seen only one loon pair hatch a chick on the pond during our time here.

Smaller but likewise charismatic, kingfishers sound an alarm often echoed by loons and amplified by ospreys. All alert us to the arrival of a bald eagle, whom every one of them loathes. Eagles are notorious scavengers, and we have seen them bully smaller birds into giving up their prey. With populations down to a few hundred in the

<sup>11</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 163.

decade in which I was born, bald eagles' comeback had been the biggest conservation success story of my lifetime. Seeing these interactions heightened my awareness that eagles eat loon chicks, and led me to learn that both species are now seen as threatened by chronic lead poisoning via fishing tackle. Eagles are magnificent soaring in the sky, but harder to take at close range. At the club one morning, a doubled version of the peal call that signals death or danger in old-west movies, but stuck obnoxiously on repeat, led us to two bald eagles locked in a screaming match. Hawks whistle, ospreys chirp, turkey vultures hiss, but our biggest raptors just sound awful.

Summer sounds are typically far more beautiful. Because it is the twenty-first century, I was able to identify the most beautiful of summer birdsongs indoors, in the dead of winter, and as a result of reading Carolynn Van Dyke's essay on medieval literary representations of birdsong in *The Palgrave Handbook of Animals and Literature*. Her citation of an ornithologist's description of the hermit thrush as North America's nightingale piqued my curiosity, leading to the Cornell Ornithology Lab's online archives.<sup>12</sup> The sound then coming from my laptop instantly transported me from a cold February afternoon to a sunny June morning. The sensibly sleepy dog let it lie, but in my mind we were out of the snowbound house onto the green leafy trails facing the pond.

There, a hillside stream has long since carved out a natural amphitheatre which attracts the most talented avian singers. A few years back, when hermit thrushes also nested next door to our house, I noticed the difference in skill and range between the performances of a bumbling beginner, relegated to a shabbier stage, and his virtuoso relative who claimed the choice venue in the neighbourhood for showcasing his own exceptional talent. Last year, there was only one hermit thrush fellow, an inferior singer who occupied the prime real estate, so I assume that our superstar is no more. Perhaps the newcomer's skills will improve over the years.

12 Van Dyke, "Chaucer, Lydgate, and the Half-heard Nightingale", 129.



Summer days stretch on and bring all sorts out of the woodwork. In a field annually disturbed by haying only once and late in the season, a red fox den turns out cubs nearly every year. An abundance of mice, chipmunks, and squirrels draws them to the stonewalls along the roadsides in search of easy prey. The concentration of the hunt sometimes overpowers their wariness, affording us an occasional glimpse, however unwanted. Last year, a fox killed two of the five children that were born under our garage to an exceptionally large, silvery old grandmother woodchuck. Her resourcefulness in keeping the remaining three alive, however, made it easy to see in her the spirit of her own ancestor who schooled Gluskabe (a.k.a. Glooscap), her grandson and the culture hero of our region's First Peoples.<sup>13</sup>

This year, on the other side of our city, a rabid fox mauled an elderly woman walking her dog, an incident that reminds me that foxes are best observed with caution. A curious incidence of a wild turkey following a fox across the road at dusk was explained only after we ventured closer and could finally see the chick dangling from the fox's mouth.

Like eagles, wild turkeys have made an incredible rebound from near extinction in my lifetime. Our resident flocks are no longer to be seen around our house, now that a neighbour has started encouraging his hunting dogs to kill them. Yet they persist as a large flock or two, circumnavigating his property. I can never get over the unlikeliness with which they take flight with a palpable whoosh up into the big white pines. Multiple toms can be heard gobbling away at each other into early summer. Before the snow melted completely, one year a tom marched down the driveway on display, puffed-out feathers making him look ten times bigger.

A less predictable story is the persistence, or rather the permutation, of Eastern timber wolves through hybridization with coyotes. They can be heard yip-yip-yipping on still moonlit nights year-round, but I notice them most in the warmest months, likely because then I'm out later and longer with our dog. There is so much going on

13 Dana et al, "Still They Remember Me", 56-57

outdoors as the days grow longer that it is easy to linger. I nibble the ripening strawberries, which are followed by raspberries, then blueberries (the only ones that dogs seem to like), then blackberries, all the while marvelling at the succession of flowering plants, the flights of the bats who live in the siding of our house, the fireflies flashing to each other from mid-air and in the long grass, that is, until the coyotes start up. Three of them can sound like thirty. But are they dangerous? North of here, in eastern Canada, a young singer-songwriter on a solo hike became the only known North American to be killed by coyotes, their abruptly changed behaviour believed to have followed from their becoming habituated to running down moose.<sup>14</sup>

The wide-ranging amounts of (grey? Algonquin?) wolf DNA in them further complicates the picture. On one of our regular walking routes through the woods behind our house, the dog's other person once had to stare down a large, bold loner in broad daylight, who looked and acted far more wolflike than like coyotes, who are typically shy. A few weeks later, a neighbour lost a similar staring contest; she holed herself up in her horse barn and called for help, although the critter had melted back into the woods before her spouse arrived with a gun. Large doglike turds filled with grey squirrel hair are left in the middle of our driveway intentionally, according to our dog. She examines them carefully. Hearing their vocalizations on a late-night empty walk also sharpens the dog's curiosity, even as it tightens my grip on the flashlight and the leash. I pick up our pace back to the house.

As August nights grow shorter, one of the pond's many kinds of dragonfly comes up the hill. It is a species of large blue ones — Blue dashers? Eastern pondhawks? Great blue skimmers? I really ought to try harder at species identification — and together they engage in a high-speed, looping flight display so beautifully choreographed that they never bump into us, each other, or anything. Seeing fewer each night portends the end of the season, as does the sound of another late arrival. Like opossums, cicadas have been moving steadily northward because average temperatures

14 Gehrt et al., "Severe Environmental Conditions", 354.

are rising. Amid the din of native grasshoppers and crickets, I have begun to hear one, maybe a handful into early September, all abruptly curtailed by the first frost.

## Conclusions Afoot

Audubon's Christmas bird counts, turtle roadkill surveys, and other numerical accountings are important but impersonal tools for measuring transformation within local ecologies. As Ursula Heise argues in *Imagining Extinction*, collecting and crunching numbers lends a false sense of priority to red-listing narratives that all too often inspire affective extremes, whether of indifference to or fixation on suffering, mourning, and melancholia.<sup>15</sup> Situating anthropogenic extinction as bridging the storyworlds of humans and other animals requires more creative and localized methods, including the ones that environmental field philosopher Thom van Dooren models in *Flight Ways* as a series of scientifically informed stories of species extinction told in terms of unravelling lifeways at the frayed edges of human lives.<sup>16</sup> My own experiments in storytelling here aim similarly for holistic analysis of several kinds of animals inhabiting the same space differently, picking up or picking at threads that might unstitch or weave tighter understandings of our contributions to each other's lives and deaths. What are you to make of it all, you travellers from away, reading this in the future?

You have joined me for a while along the paths of growing intimacies, both at close range with dogs, and at distances with wild neighbours. You making time to read this adds something special to the admixture of love and mourning that characterizes kinaesthetic empathy in a world encountering catastrophic losses. To enrich monitoring practices regarding endangered species, we have to work together to develop more ways of outlining choices and responsibilities in encounters beyond the all too academic fiction of being a know-it-all, and far away from what another friend Donna Haraway critiques as the "god-trick" of scientific objectivity.<sup>17</sup> When targeted

<sup>15</sup> Heise, *Imagining Extinction*, 62.

<sup>16</sup> van Dooren, *Flight Ways*, 147.

<sup>17</sup> Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, Women*, 189.



**Figure 5**

Cooldown at the Stone Wall.  
Photo by Mik Morrisey © 2023.

for environmental monitoring, the animals in my life are netted to be counted, saddled with invasive monitoring devices, catalogued as corpses, and, yes, even counted at Christmas. What we need to work on is growing appreciation for what they see when they look at us looking at them, and how we might respond better to their responsiveness, all as part of the everyday work of becoming neighbourly.

I approach them here in writing as in life, as partners in crafting stories of what Lauren Berlant, writing with Michael Warner, posits as the nonstandard intimacies through which all of our lives become quietly structured, if not always entirely enriched.<sup>18</sup> Berlant was also a friend, and the genius of their vision long ago empowered me to research further the queer counter-public potentials for humans who find themselves never in social isolation while dog walking. Engaging in the practice over time has brought me closer to my dogs and in turn into closer range with the endangered animals, plants, forests, and their lifeways populating our fleeting everyday lives, sharpening our senses and awareness that living with always borders living without wild animal neighbours. So I conclude by way of a few strong impressions.

Winter solstice came and went yesterday, a glorious cold sunny one with just enough snow, perfect for skiing out the back door into the new year. Growing up closer to Thoreau's Walden Pond than to our pond here, I could expect snow to stick by the end of November. That was decades ago, and now a heavy snowfall in December can melt away completely before the new year arrives. Here in these foothills of the White Mountains, we feel lucky to ski natural snow before January, and even so sometimes have to wait well into that month for the gifts that snow brings.

Writing this next paragraph a few days later on a January morning, just in from a walk out the back door, makes me ever more grateful for life in the Great North Woods. People come from all over the world to enjoy the lush summers, to marvel at how they shade into the fireworks of fall colours, but Maine forests are beautiful in all

18 Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public", 559.

seasons. Bob Ross of *The Joy of Painting* TV show fame could not have worked his magic better than the weather so far this year at dusting our evergreens with just enough snow to vary the views each day. Snow amplifies rosy-fingered dawns, blinding-white mid-days, and burning sunsets across the landscape, along with the blue-blacks and silvery moonlights of long winter nights. Even if so much of the colour eludes her vision range, our dog ensures that I appreciate them all.

Months will pass before rising sap turns the dormant grey-brown bark of hardwoods into a startling range of colours, especially in the upper branches where some become more vibrant than their own blossoms, leaves, berries, even the birds to follow. For now, I enrich my research and writing by reading the snow's ever-changing record of a rich diversity of wild neighbours, and by attending to our dog, who helps me to see the myriad of ways in which others also benefit from the bounty of our woodlands home.

A week or so after writing those last paragraphs, I returned from a dog walk still shaking from an encounter with an exposed ribcage much bigger than my own, upended on a bloody fur cape, with four legs akimbo but somehow still attached, and the head, which at first I thought was missing, twisted under the whole frightening mess. In the instant of discovery, I'm not sure if a human corpse could have terrified me more than that dead deer, the snow around the remains carpeted with the doglike tracks of coyotes. On reflection, I realize that I write compulsively, trying to rationalize it—it's what predators do, maybe the deer was already hit by a car, they don't live forever—and become all the more aware of my complicity, rattled.

Largely unwritten here, humans are unsettling, too, only in different ways. Before he passed away a few years ago, one neighbour explained that he had lived here all his life, on land his family has owned under their own English surname since before the American Revolution. Another neighbour with a French surname called attention to her own potentially longer heritage claim, despite having grown up downtown in rented millworker housing along the river, before moving up to the ridge forty-five years ago. She has

assembled many clues that her grandmother was Native American, only no genealogical records, just memories of an eerie silence about that branch of the family tree.

A major waterway, the Androscoggin River traditionally served the Wabanakis — the collective term for the Maliseet, Mi'kmaq, Passamaquoddy, and Penobscot “Peoples of the Dawn Land” — as a route for trade, hunting, and fishing. Near the local airport, remains of hunting settlements date back ten thousand years, long before Eurowhite people like me embarked on genocidal campaigns spun from conflicts that my schoolbooks named King Philip (not Metacombet)’s War, King William (not Castin)’s War, and other bloody periods of settlement history, whereby British and French colonial powers exploited inter-tribal tensions. Stolen land was denuded by commercial logging, old growth prevented from resurgence by agriculture, and major waterways poisoned with the effluence of now-defunct textile and paper mills. Dams are being dismantled, and waterways cleared of industrial refuse, in efforts aided by Federal anti-pollution laws enacted during my lifetime.

It remains anyone’s guess whether the abundance of anadromous fishes like alewives and salmon will ever return here to Auburn, a place once called Amitgonpontook, meaning the place to dry fish for food over winter. These species are incredible voyageurs from fresh-to saltwater and back, and their recovery bears and shares human influences. Every year, the state fish hatchery stocks our neighbourhood pond with alewives in an effort to restore the great fish runs of yore. There is no point in trying to bring back landlocked trout, who are outcompeted by smallmouth bass introduced sometime in the last century, as well as by abundant native perch species in that particular body of water. Our dog sometimes joins me in watching fish swim, jump, and feed on other nonhumans. High levels of mercury, PFAS, PCBs, dioxins, and other toxic substances accumulating in large specimens prompt the state to issue ever more restrictive fish consumption advisories. Pregnant women and children are the targets only doubtfully spared exposure by such efforts, but wildlife enjoys no such advocacy and no illusions about choice.

Where is this all going? I'd like to think that sharing this with you makes me a better posthuman neighbour, and inspires greater appreciation for the positive environmental potentials for dog walking. Living through Covid times has brought new encounters with losses, poignantly of loved ones, along with new appreciation for how everyone shares lives with so many others. These days, we don't have to be zoonotic disease experts to appreciate that wildlife structures our own experiences as domestic creatures more than we'll ever know. By sharing some of what I have learned from perambulating with constant canine company, my hope is to inspire extensions of empathy toward ineffable relations that make people more at home in nature. Dog walking can literally get us out of the house and thereby prepare us to embrace the practicalities of changes that are necessary to mitigate global threats to cross-species coexistence.

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