A Walk Through the Woods

By Emily Spicer

Being surrounded by three hundred acres of fields, woods, and pure nature allows me to enjoy many different kinds of walks. Sometimes, we enjoy walks along the driveway; however, I recently decided to take a walk through the woods. Some woods surround our house, while others lie across one of the huge farm fields. Even though the woods are not as thick as they once were because of the trees the property owner removed, they are still full of life. I really felt the need to escape into nature and ignore life's stresses, so a walk through the woods surrounding my house sounded like a wonderful idea.

As I took the first step, the dusty dirt puffed up around my boots. We hadn't had much rain in a while, so everything was very dry. I kept walking, watching where I stepped in case any snakes popped out and making sure I didn't trip over any limbs. I slowly began to enter the thicket of trees, brush, and vines. Pure silence began to envelop me, and it was a kind of peace that made me want to take a slow, deep breath, stand there, and let everything in my body calm. After taking a moment to enjoy the silence, I continued my walk and let my senses take in everything. There were small, thin trees that mostly stretched up tall and had few low-lying limbs. However, there was the occasional large tree that looked as if it had been there for many, many years.

I started to hear the mockingbirds calling to each other and mimicking other sounds. I saw the occasional rabbit pop out for a second before noticing me and then running back to its little hole. There was still enough tree cover that there weren't a ton of wasps or other bugs to bother me. I moved quietly and slowly so as not to startle any of the wildlife around me, for I was in their space. I noticed many different plants, including one called goldenrod. This medicinal plant has a green stalk, and from about midway up to the top, a gold-colored, pollen-like flower covers it. Some people harvest this plant to make teas and tinctures. There were also poisonous berries and many other plants. I wasn't familiar with some of them. I sometimes use my phone to learn about unfamiliar plants, but I was doing my best to stay phone-free on this occasion.

Suddenly, I heard a crunch from somewhere nearby, yet I couldn't see what it was. I stopped moving and stood still with my eyes peeled. When I heard another crunch, I slowly turned in its direction, and a full-grown doe stood in the distance, staring at me. Part of me wanted to get closer to her, yet I knew that if I did, she would run. Therefore, I stood there, admiring her beautiful tan fur, and watched her watch me before she took off. A few feet behind her ran a set of twin fawns. Both were a darker tan than their mother, and they had a

few white spots. I smiled, feeling thankful to have experienced that, and then continued my walk.

Sadly, I also noticed the occasional bit of trash. As I was walking, I came across a huge pile containing at least a couple hundred black flowerpots that had been dumped there at some point. They had been there for a long time, and no one knew who had dumped them. Next to them was a huge tree that had fallen at some point. I could tell it had been lying there for a while, as moss had started growing from the ground and wrapping itself around the tree. The tree looked as if it had slowly begun to decompose back into the earth. As I got a closer look, I could see all types of little bugs that had made this tree their home. I did not doubt that, hidden in other parts, there were snacks and other types of wildlife living in this tree as well. I decided not to disturb it anymore and continued walking, wondering what else I might find.

I ended up in a small clearing in the middle of the trees. A hunter had put up a deer-lick stand there for hunting deer. I heard a bird call above me and looked up to see a beautiful bald eagle soaring several feet overhead. I could barely make out its white head and dark body. I knew that I had seen this eagle flying from much farther away and had heard its call, but this was the closest I had ever been and likely ever would be. I was in awe of its magnificent size and beauty and couldn't believe the brief glimpse I had just gotten as it circled above before flying away. For a brief moment, I wished I had captured it, yet I reminded myself that sometimes having a phone in hand can cause me to miss things, and I might not have seen it had I been staring at it.

I decided to take a bit of a turn farther into the woods to see what else I might come across. I was thankful that it wasn't nighttime, when I would have been more concerned about encountering predators. However, I did have my phone in my pocket and remained somewhat aware of my surroundings because bobcats and mountain lions were around here. In fact, even black bears had been spotted only twenty miles from where I lived.

I looked at one of the smaller trees near me and saw little birds in a nest. They had some baby chicks they were feeding. These chicks were hollering loudly, all being very impatient to be fed. In another tree, some squirrels were scampering up and down, likely already preparing their nests for the winter to come, as the weather still gets very cold here at times. I stood still as I noticed something about six feet in front of me that looked like a black stick. Then I realized it was moving. This moving black stick was a four- to five-foot-long rat snake. I stood still so as not to disturb it. While it was not venomous, I preferred not to disturb it, especially since rat snakes can still constrict and bite when threatened. At the same time, I felt better about seeing it, as rat snakes help control mouse and rat populations and play an important role in the ecosystem.

I turned again to start slowly working my way back toward home. I didn't notice anything new for a moment and found the lack of animal sounds and movement almost odd. Then I noticed a large hole in the ground, approximately one to two feet across, that I suspected might belong to a family of coyotes. I moved even more cautiously past it; those were not creatures I wanted to disturb or awaken. I walked about ten feet beyond it when I felt something odd crunch beneath my boot that didn't feel like a stick. I looked down and saw something white. I bent down and noticed it was a bone. Then, about a foot to its side, at the base of a medium-sized tree, there was a deer skull. It had one antler remaining, with five points. I could see the whole upper portion of the skull, including the upper teeth and eye sockets. The other antler was missing. It appeared to have belonged to a ten-point buck.

I picked up the skull to examine it more closely. It was dry and clean, suggesting it had been there for a while. I could see tooth marks on the side of the skull where the antler was missing, left by something that had been chewing on it. The entire thing was fascinating to me. I decided to take it home with me. For the remainder of the walk, I watched where I was going, yet I was mesmerized by this skull and kept wondering what this deer's story might have been. For it to have developed such impressive antlers, I imagined it must have spent several years roaming these woods. I wondered if it had once been related to the doe I saw earlier with the twin fawns. I wondered how long ago it had died and what exactly had killed it.

Could a hunter have shot it without bringing it down immediately, then assumed the shot had missed and left it behind? The deer could have succumbed to its injury and become an easy snack for the surrounding wildlife. It could even have been that a pack of coyotes ganged up on it and killed it, or maybe a cougar or mountain lion got hold of it and, once it had its fill, left the rest.

The mystery will always fascinate me. Nature is such a force to be reckoned with. Before I knew it, I was back at the edge of the woods and had finished my walk. I hadn't fully realized it, as I had let my mind escape into the mystery of this deer skull. Now, I couldn't wait to show my kids and husband and work on cleaning and preserving it. I was grateful for such an enlightening and amazing walk, and all that nature had gifted me during it.