

# North Country Notebook

George Vukelich



The Prof and I spent the other day at his farm tucked away in the coulee country of Richland County.

On the face of it, we were there to do some trouting, for these hills hide the silver little waters which hide the silver little fish. But along the way, we spent a lot of the sun-sweetened day tramping the ridges, poking around in the valleys and performing all those soul-satisfying activities that The Prof calls "researching the project."

And this land—the challenge of managing this land—has become The Prof's project.

No—more than that. This land has become his life's work.

In his chino pants and work boots, a bottle of beer in his tanned hand, he could pass for your average game warden. Or forest ranger. Or farmer.

He's proud of that, because he understands these folks and their problems and he's one of them.

But the moment he starts talking, you know you're hanging out with a pretty rare bird indeed.

His background was essentially forestry, but he felt he had to broaden himself beyond a single specialty, because to work with Nature, to "manage" Nature (and he says to use that word advisedly, because you don't really *manage* Nature), you find out what Ma Nature's House Rules & Regulations are, and then you kind of "care-take" while Ma manages herself.

"The trouble with specialties," he says, as a former specialist, "is that you literally can't see the forest for the trees. One person is an expert on bugs, another on trees, another on soil, another on water, another on air, and on and on. But the only way to understand Nature and how she works is to collate, if you will, *all the specialties into one discipline, one*

*holistic study.* That's Ecology, and that's what we need desperately."

He squinted at the once gullied hills, now knit whole and healthy by the healing alfalfa, and I was struck by how much he was beginning to look like Aldo Leopold and sound like Sigurd Olson. I was struck, too, by how much the words he was speaking now reminded me of the words written by Stephen Levine a half-dozen years ago in his book *Planet Steward: Journal Of A Wildlife Sanctuary*.

I begin to learn, Stephen Levine had set down, the ten thousand forms that have arisen from the One: names, shapes, properties, divinities, histories; how the soil came about, the different kinds of rock, the fossil pollens of plants that have preceded this voyager man by many eons; the calls of dozens of species; the tracks of carnivores, angels and wood nymphs, the dihedral sweep of the vulture, planet janitor; porcupine's nibblings as telltale signs; fox, badger, skunk, coyote; and heavy-handed self-justifying man—the greatest of predators, the only saint.

We drive the ridge to the fishing water, and The Prof points into the lush valley far below.

Three deer graze the alfalfa, round-rumped and sleek as horses.

We pass the drumming log where, last time, we watched the motionless grouse for an eternity. And he watched us.

We drop down into the fishing valley and park, and when we alight, two redtail hawks hang high on the thermal, a living mandala of the sacred places.

Each being here, The Planet Steward had written, is the mother and sacrifice of every other. There is none that is not

a perfect part of the whole. Each creature is indispensable, rising and falling in its time for the furtherance of every other creature. This is place of breeding and feeding. The owl chants the night. Dove Orpheus coos up the moon. The fly-catchers, titmice, grosbeaks, ravens, hawks, woodpeckers, eagles, vultures, sparrows, swifts, chats, mockingbirds, bluebirds and hummingbirds are strophe to the antistrophe of the crickets, beetles, fireflies, scarlet dragonflies and the multi-formed crawlings of moist unknowns. The turtle, algae on his shell, moves like a Zen garden across the duckweed. The native fish find dark cathedral in the winding stream. This is the planet brotherhood.

And we rejoin the greater whole, becoming just another animal family on the land.

We take our rods and The Prof leads the way.

He stops and stands over a rock-rimmed springhole. Then he points to a rectangular depression in the forest floor above it.

"Folks lived here," The Prof says. "A hundred years ago. They farmed here, used this water, this spring. Probably ran it down to tank below for the stock. That's the old town road along the treeline."

The town road, like the old house site, was an overgrown depression in the forest floor.

I thought of how it must have been for those people in this place a hundred years ago, and the hawks watching.

"They probably planted those trees along the old road," The Prof said. "They left two trees."

Not much, maybe, but most of don't leave even that.

Then we went fishing.