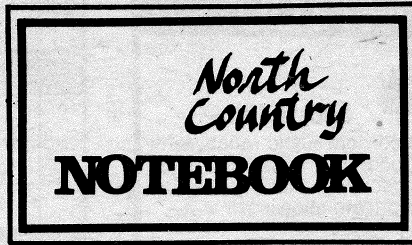


A primeval sojourn on the backwaters

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I took the blue canoe and fished the marsh the other day, and for all that time I was the only person on this planet.

You don't meet many people in marshes because not many people hang out there. Certainly not people with big boats. And big motors. And big egos.

Mostly you meet youngsters, if you meet anyone at all, the Tom Sawyers and Huck Finns and Becky Thatchers, a lot of them barefoot and bankfishing with live bait and bobbers, catching panfish and praying for bass.

But school isn't out yet, so the other day the only youngster in the marsh was me, barefoot, stripped to my denim cutoffs. The glistening Clement paddle was my passport to a primeval world.

For there is something primal about marshes and swamps and backwaters. They are Twilight

Zones between the deep waters and the high ground, wetlands often "too thick to drink and too thin to plow," not quite civilized and tamed, not quite secured and comfortable, not quite a fit place for mankind.

I've been paddling back into marshlands for most of my life, and I think the reason most people don't is that marshlands are simply too wild, too disturbing, too alien for their tastes.

There are too many bugs. Too many dark holes. Too many mudflats. Too much smell. Too much decay. Too much of Nature that now seems plain unnatural in the raw.

On this day, the marshland stretched like a lost world in the sea of sunlight.

Red winged blackbirds perched over their parcels of territory, swaying above the cattails like battle pennons.

Platoons of mud and box turtles lined the bleached sunning logs head to tail, a silent armored convoy, stalled for the moment and away from the war.

In the shallows, great monstrous carp, by twos and threes, thrashed and churned in the sacred, awesome act of spawning. They exploded along the mudflats like mortar shell. I watched them without judgment.

The canoe moved silently as a

shadow. Once I surprised a muskrat on its haunches, looking the other way. Once I was surprised by a mallard bursting up over my bow.

I took black crappies at the brushpile on the ultralight and a Pinky. I took a two pound largemouth at the lily bed on a plastic worm. I kept the crappies and put back the bass.

It would have been better only with Dynie. Or the Old Man. Or any of the school kids, including our own. And worse, probably awful, with most anybody else.