

# The Lonely Season

*Autumn comes  
to Northern  
Wisconsin.*

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

**A**utumn began the weekend of Labor Day. The Canada geese weren't swarming into Horicon yet, but that's when it began.

There was a chill in the air, the breeze had summer all squeezed out of it, and what was left was cold as trout water on your face. I think it was the first time since last spring that we were fishing without taking off our long-sleeved sweatshirts.

There was no one swimming today. There was no one at the public beach at all. Swimming and the people who did it belonged to another season, a season that now seemed as far away as the far shore of the empty lake. The swimmers were gone, and it would be a half-year before they came back.

Six months, hell! It will be seven months, perhaps eight months before humans even take off their shoes and wade into the water here. And until that time only the fish will swim off this beach.

The sand beach was barren and printless as a desert. The lifeguard's little boat was pulled up high and dry. Just looking at this water gave you the shivers.

Beyond the perimeter of the beach, a Great Blue Heron hunted in the shallows, walking so slowly it seemed to be in pain. It reminded you of an arthritic old man without a cane.

Then ZIIIPP! The heron's head shot forward in a blur of speed, its beak disappeared into the water like a blade and when it reemerged it held a small, struggling fish that flashed silver ever so briefly and then, in a seamless gulp, disappeared from our world, even as the swimmers had.

The heron stood there on its wire legs, immobile as a lawn flamingo, its eyes as cold as the chill of this day and of all the days to come before the swimmers return.

All birds have those stone-cold eyes. Some birds may have the sweet, sweet voices of the garlanded glades, but all birds have those cold eyes.

The eyes are the most obvious reptilian trait the birds inherited from their ancestors. Get close to the cute little chickadee hanging upside down at your feeder and you could be staring into the eye sockets of a cobra.

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# A Season of Silences

Pine cones floated  
away on the current  
like a little armada  
without captains  
or rudders...



PAUL STROEDE

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**T**here was a plop in the water and at first we thought it was a fish, rising and feeding. It sounded for all the world like the slurp—PLOOTSH!—that a trout sometimes makes sucking in insects from the surface.

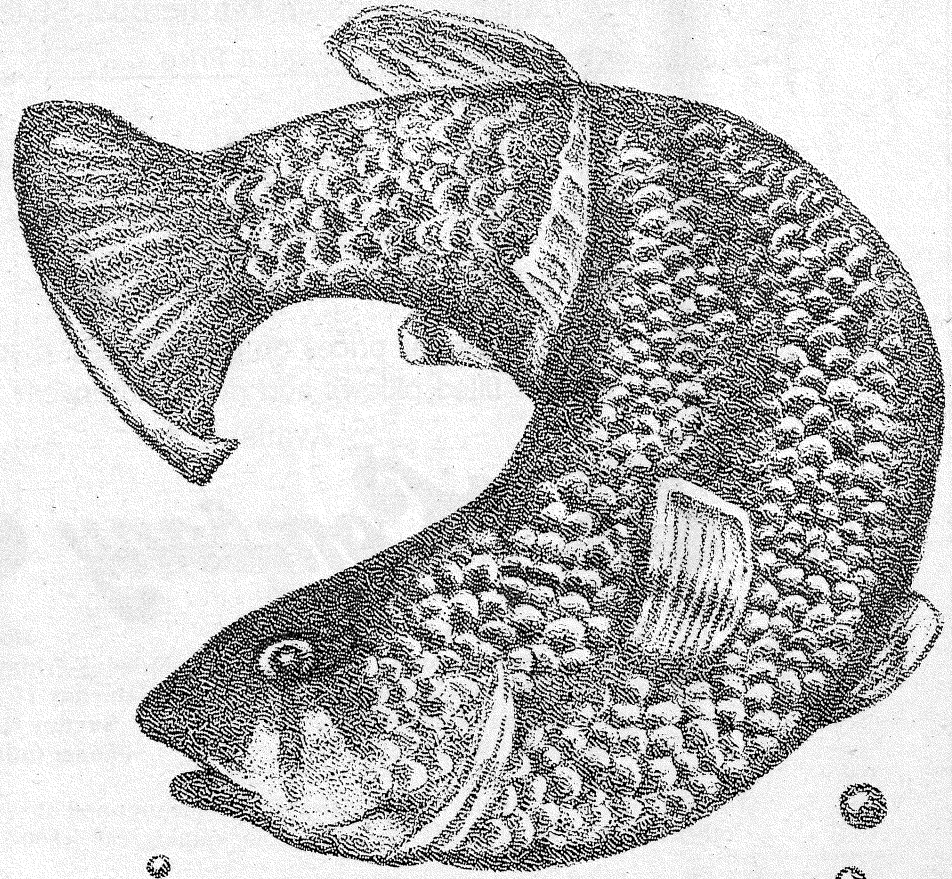
But there were no insects, there was no hatch that we could see. We were more likely to get a batch of frost before we got another hatch of flies.

Then another PLOP! and there was a pine cone in the water bobbing like a cork alongside the canoe. We looked up into the high green canopy above us. Clusters of plump brown cones were clinging to the branches like colonies of bats.

Again, PLOP! PLOP! as two more cones fell into the water. The cones were just letting go from the pine branches and plunging downward to start a new generation.

Instead of the nurturing duff of the forest floor, they found themselves in what was, for them, a hostile environment in which their only hope lay in being carried to a shore somewhere, a bit of land, a crevice wherein life could hide and grow and send out tendrils and then roots as thick as chains and eventually anchor a massive

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## AUTUMN

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trunk to the stone. And summer people not yet born would one day pause in their canoes and stare at the sight and exclaim: "My God! Look at that pine tree growing right out of the rock!" And even as they gawked, pine cones would be parachuting into the autumnal waters around them.

I remember seeing a documentary made on the Amazon River where some sort of fruit—was it a nut?—fell from overhanging trees into the dark river and the water boiled as schools of piranha swirled in to feed. The narrator pointed out that here was a "symbiotic relationship between the fish and the fruit" and that the piranha knew when the fruit was ready to fall and they assembled in their thousands for the feasting.

It was comforting to speculate that the piranhas' reputation as voracious meat-eaters was not their whole story, that they had a nice, vegetarian side to their nature, and that perhaps they only chewed on people and cattle when nothing else was PLOPPING! around.

No fish came to eat the pine cones, and they floated away on the current like a little armada without captains or rudders.

The fishing will get better in the fall. It always does. And as the nights get colder and the days get crisp and tangy as fresh apples, not only will there be more fish, there will be fewer folks fishing. Unless the football fans give up the ghost altogether and flock into the countryside like lemmings seeking surcease and solitude. Solitude, as the tribal elders tell us, has its place.

"It is not good for man," John Stuart Mill observed in his *Principles of Political Economy*, "to be kept perforce at all times in the presence of his species."

"A world from which solitude is extirpated," he wrote, "is a very poor ideal. Solitude, in the sense of being often alone, is essential to any depth of

meditation or of character; and solitude in the presence of natural beauty and grandeur is the cradle of thoughts and aspirations which are not only good for the individual, but which society could ill do without."

That is the white man's way of saying what the old shamans have been telling us from time immemorial: If you would know the Great Mystery, the Great Spirit, you must do this: You must go into the great silences far from the dwellings of men.

And then, you must just listen and wait.

One of the beauties of the coming autumn is that you don't have to travel as far to get to the silences. Even as the swimmers retreat from the waters so, also, will the boaters and the canoeists and the fisherfolk retreat. Soon, there will be fewer hikers and bikers and happy campers. In effect, the silences will return for a spell. Between the season of the outboard motor and the snowmobile, there is this magical season of quiet in the Wisconsin woods, in the Wisconsin countryside, on the Wisconsin beaches.

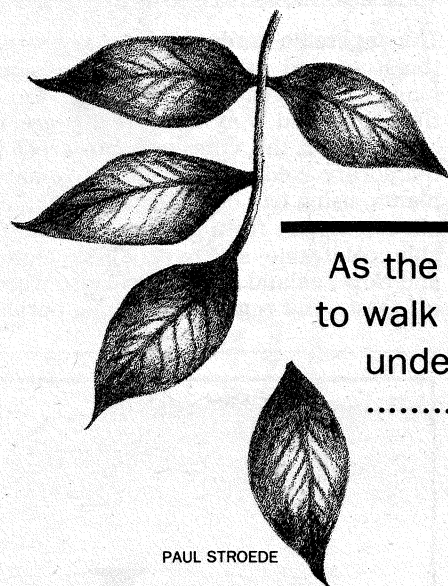
As the leaves turn colors, to walk the October woods is to be underwater in a golden sea.

The covey of grouse that bursts from the pine thicket like grenades will scare you to within an inch of your life, and you will gulp your breath and hear your heart. And as the pine needles shower down on you, you might well laugh and never shoot the shotgun at all, even if the only reason you are out walking the woods in the first place is to kick up grouse and shoot the shotgun. That's the reason you say you're out here, but in the reverberating quiet, you can call yourself a liar out loud and only the dog will hear you.

Even the stretch of river where you encountered the war canoes from Jellystone Park on one of summer's last days is silent now. That was the day you went 'round the bend and there they were: dozens of rental canoes—it seemed like thousands—boiling toward you in a swirling chaos of red paddles

and life jackets and yelling and screaming and frothing water that looked like a feeding frenzy was just getting going good.

Strange how the people, two to a canoe, are all faceless now, including the bow paddler who sat facing the stern and yelling something unintelligible to us and probably to her partner as well. If I listen hard, I hear her yet. It is a lazy, crazy sound of summer that Nat King Cole never sang about, specifically.



PAUL STROEDE

Sometimes in this lonely season, whether paddling the canoe or prowling the Lake Michigan beach near the Sturgeon Bay Ship Canal, you have a terrible compulsion to turn quickly and look behind you because you just feel someone or something is back there, watching you like an animal, but it is not an animal. It waits. The feeling can chill you, even in warm sunshine.

Of course, there's never anything there that you can see. But is there something there that we can't see?

A lot of people know this feeling. I know a woman who is convinced that one day, when she gets that feeling, she will turn and her father will be there, coming around the bend in the trail.

Her father, who has been dead and gone these many years.

The Good Gray Poet, Walt Whitman, knew that feeling too, and he described it better than most boonie-walkers.

"How is it," Old Walt asked in *Specimen Days*, "that in all the serenity and lonesomeness of solitude, away off here amid the hush of the forest, alone, or as I have found in prairie wilds or mountain stillness, one is never entirely without the instinct of looking around (I never am, and others tell me the same of themselves, confidentially) for somebody to appear, or start up out of the earth or from behind some tree or rock?"

"Is it a lingering, inherited remains of man's primitive wariness, from the wild animals? Or from his savage ancestry far back?"

As the leaves turn colors,  
to walk the woods is to be  
underwater in a golden sea.

"It is not at all nervousness or fear. Seems as if something unknown were possibly lurking in those bushes or solitary places. Nay, it is quite certain there is—some vital unseen presence."

That's the feeling you get in this north country season more than any other. It's probably because more and more people are beginning their annual retreat and the summer places are being abandoned, getting shuttered and locked up for the long winter. Sure, there's muskie fishing in October to come and duck hunting and deer hunting and the great goose flights of Canadas going south, but something monumental is beginning to happen in this season, and it will not end until the geese and swimmers return.

Until then, fish this silence and listen. It was pretty much this way in the Beginning. It will be pretty much this way at the End. ■