

Autumn 1963

## NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK

by George Vukelich

The poet T. S. Eliot once wrote, ". . . I grow old, I grow old, I shall wear my trousers rolled." You can darned well tell Mr. Eliot is from St. Louis, Missouri, and not from St. Germain, Wisconsin. A north country man would have put it, "I grow old and don't give two hoots. My underwear is tucked into my boots."

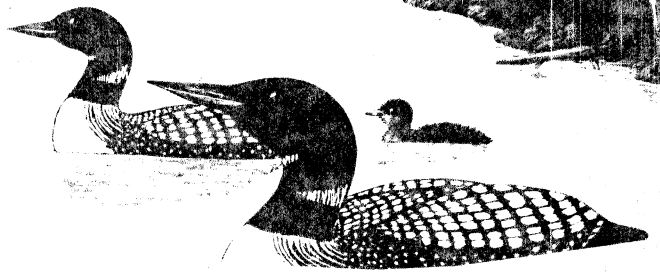
There is a chill in the night-time air, my friend, and in the bones as well. We slept under a blanket last night (the first time since last spring) and I fear the autumn is upon us. I say fear, but I don't really mean "fear." Not really fear. It's just a figure of speech. I knew a boy once who feared the autumn, hated it in fact, because there was so much evidence of death in Nature. The leaves mostly. And the colors draining and fading away into a dull greyness. He said the countryside reminded him of dead lifeless ashes. The great fleeing flocks of Canada geese depressed him. The skeleton oaks haunted him. The swirling withered leaves could make him physically sick.

I have a good idea of what the fearful boy needed. Thermal underwear, for one thing. And a real honest to goodness fireplace instead of that phoney gas-jet in a cooped up apartment. The boy needed to follow a dog through a stubbled field after a cornfat pheasant. He needed to stand still as a statue on a cold windless morning straining his eyeballs to pick out a plump gray squirrel spread-eagled on a gray oak. He needed to fill a gunny sack so chockful of hickory nuts that even a grown man had to drag the darn thing. He needed to fish muskies on a lonesome October lake when you would have sworn every living person had left this planet. Or track a wounded deer into a frost blackened swamp where you got the same feeling.

It all depends on how you look at things. To everything there is a season, as the saying has it. One of the great joys of autumn is a warm, tight house with birch logs crackling in the fireplace while the north winds are stripping through the ancient oaks like razor honed knives. There are others. Brilliant jays and flaming cardinals coming to full feeders as regularly as clockwork. Orange faced pumpkins and red cheeked kids. House cats curling in the November sunlight and a beagle litter on the kitchen floor.

A fearful boy needs to know that life goes on. The leaves drop dead but not the tree. The flower is gone but not the seed. Life goes on — under the hard ground, the soft snows, in the hidden protected places. A fearful boy needs to accept this eventually. And when he does, he is no longer fearful. He is no longer a boy either. I think you can mark him as a man from that time on. My father says that a man needs only two things to live in the woods. "A philosophy. And thermal underwear." If you can't have both, forget the philosophy.

Fall is the time of great deer hunt in our north country. I don't hunt anymore, but I'm not righteous or moral about it. If you hunt deer, I think that's fine. And I hope you find your greatest buck ever this season. We found one once and nobody ever got him.



### DRIVING THE SWAMP

*Across the snowfilled valley land  
Our father watches from his stand.  
Here, our big buck cleared the stream.  
The damning prints in the frozen sand.*

*Upwind, we work as a combat team,  
An army of cedars waits by the stream  
Between us now and our father's place  
Through 7X glasses, he sees an old dream.*

*Remember the flush on a young man's face  
The first time he opened his rifle case.  
In this swamp, one great last deer  
Listening for drivers and gauging our pace.*

*He knows again that we are near.  
It is the terrible time of year.  
My brothers hope we find him here.  
I hope we do not find him here.*

Ernest Swift, rose from a game warden in Wisconsin's Sawyer County to become Director of the National Wildlife Federation in Washington, D. C. In between he was a forest ranger, Director of the Wisconsin Conservation Department and Assistant Director of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. Swift retired in 1961 and now lives in Rice Lake, Wisconsin. For the *Conservation News*, a publication of the Wildlife Federation, Mr. Swift reminisced about the old time conservation wardens:

" . . . Some of the first U. S. forest rangers — converted cowpokes — traveled in pairs, carried sidearms and were careful not to cross in front of a light after dark; this was also true of some in state service. To survive and maintain any standing with local contemporaries and critics, they had to be rugged realists, shrewd improvisers with real outdoor talents and a liking for campfires. They had to be able to line out a pack string or pole a boat upstream in white water; they had to be better than average with an axe, with firearms and a compass . . . They could turn to and pack in fish fingerlings, trap beaver on complaint, run compass, give a fair estimate on a timber stand, trail a wolf or track a man. They used 'ain't' and scrupulously avoided any scientific jargon and could drink from jug by using an index finger and elbow. If they cut themselves with an axe, which wasn't too often, they stemmed the flow of blood with spruce or pine gum or a cud of tobacco. They also had philosophies tempered in the crucible of wind, water, prairie and trees.

"They left some mighty big tracks around the country which are becoming windblown because of living conditions now vastly more complicated — but it was their effort in great measure that brought the conservation movement into the realm of professionalism and the age of science."