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Androscoggin Constant: The Town Belongs to Geese and Bears

Judi Calhoun

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Androscoggin Constant

The town belongs to geese and bears

Judi Calhoun



One of the author's spring 2020 sketches of Canada geese in Berlin, New Hampshire.

JUDI CALHOUN

WHEN THE WORLD WENT QUIET, I TOOK MY SKETCHBOOK OUT TO THE Androscoggin River to capture the *Branta canadensis*, Canada geese. I used woodless pencils . . . steel gray, sleek, and cold as winter to touch. I lined them up in a silver tin like branchless trees. H2 graphite issues a lighter line, one step up from HB, at the center scale of pencil grading standards. Creating doesn't always require excellent tools, although they help.

Making the first mark is always connection, soul to spirit, almost sacred. The beginning is vital to the paper and pencil relationship. I felt it somewhere in my soul. I was careful not to invade too deeply into the paper's texture. Long sweeping arch shapes create silky feathers isolating beautiful features defining each stunning quill. The air was alive with scattered snow flurries. I drew my turtleneck up to my ears. But for the splendor of these winged creatures, I braved the bitter cold. What artist would not?

I have always tried hard to understand the mechanism of our changing seasons here in the Great North Woods of New Hampshire, where I've lived with my husband for more than fifteen years. Here, winter is long. Snow feels like such a final postponement of spring. But birds make winter in this woodland community bearable. They come soaring, honking, and squawking across the sky in winter darkness—a wondrous symphony outside my window. These creatures that share our world haunt my dreams with visions of flying.

I cannot see them but hearing their song brings a certain comfort. They've made it home safely. This simple migratory routine that succors my belief that life can be normal again even amid a global pandemic.

The birds never worry about snow falling on spring flowers, nor do they care how our human world is getting along during the COVID-19 pandemic. Birds have only love on their minds. The majestic Androscooggin represents new life, the birth of yellow, fuzzy baby geese.

When the wind tried to steal my drawing-paper, I turned away. The birds with their long necks and kind eyes followed me as I strode quickly across Route 16 back to the house. Spring snowflakes melting against my skin, I hid my sketchbook beneath my jacket and rushed inside my studio, now cluttered with books, sketchpads, paintbrushes, silly things only I understand.

I HELD MY BREATH LIKE THE REST OF THE WORLD, HEARING NEWS OF THIS pandemic, my heart breaking for families of lost loved ones. I wasn't sure if I should worry. Was it the end of the world? I pondered things I hoped to do but had never accomplished. No. It was not over. That chubby dame in the Viking hat had not begun her aria. Besides, it's not in my nature to panic, as it does no good to worry. I found the best way to cope was to lose myself in creativity. A Chinese proverb: "The birds of worry . . . fly over your head, this you cannot change, but that they build nests in your hair, this you can prevent." It is always a choice. So, I became lost in my creative world of words.

A tremendous part of my peace comes from my faith in an intelligent designer. With so many bright youth declaring their advocacy of a nihilistic

philosophy, my belief system could be considered archaic and not very popular. I shrug it off. I see myself holding, in one hand, a shield of faith, in the other a powerful sword, the sharpest—my pen.

I EXPECTED TO WAKE UP ONE MORNING AND FEEL THE WORLD CHANGING. I did not. Life here on the Androscoggin stayed steadfast, immutable. There were subtle changes. Neighbors called to see if we were all right. Did we need anything? Hardworking young people bought food and picked up prescriptions for shut-ins. What we have here everyone in the world wants: people caring about people, an old-fashioned America. I sometimes feel a little guilty to be a part of this uncommon life in our thriving woodland paradise. I am so grateful.

I READ AN ARTICLE ON A UNIQUE PHENOMENON IN ANIMAL BEHAVIOR happening across the globe since the COVID-19 outbreak. Wildlife began appearing in unusual places because of the silence on earth from government-imposed lockdowns.

My own unusual animal encounter happened one glorious day in March when a couple of geese came strolling across the road away from the river. Perhaps they wanted to get a gander at my empty garden beds. I liked to think they came to visit *me*. After all, they had seen me with my sketchpads by the water, always watching.

My husband is a wooly man, slowly turning into Santa Claus, badly in need of a haircut since the barbershops deemed nonessential businesses had closed. He excitedly started yelling, with true Paul Revere flair, “The geese are here! The geese are here!”

From my window, I watched two of them exploring my yard. A couple, one a little delicate, the other rotund. They pecked at my lawn, honked at the house—calling me out to play. I could hardly breathe. It felt almost magical. Should I assume or entertain the idea that they came to discover me, as I have explored them?

They ambled like my husband; the stress and fears of the pandemic world do not exist to them. Perhaps both the birds and my husband sway on the fringe of existence where the peaceful flow of the river dictates their rhythm of life.

I thought maybe the geese were lovers. No . . . an old married couple. He honked at her, *It's time to go*. He turned to leave, but she stayed. He honked again, louder. She didn't want to leave; however, eventually she followed. They waddled leisurely into the middle of Route 16 holding up traffic.



JUDI CALHOUN

By now, they must have been aware of their own star power. They reminded me of elderly couples I'd seen at the beach the previous summer, mindlessly strolling into traffic, having every confidence the cars will stop.

AFTERNOONS AROUND 3 O'CLOCK I GO FOR A WALK. THERE IS A GAGGLE OF birds down toward the walking bridge along the river, near the decaying remains of rusty logging-train rails, spikes still embedded in the splintering wood. I stand still, eyes on the sun sparkling off the water. It doesn't feel like we are living through a pandemic. Being here seems almost prosaic, as if I should don a lab coat and catalog the birds rather than simply enjoy their beauty.

I opened my sketchbook and started to draw. Suddenly I felt uncomfortably aware of how oddly quiet it was. Across the street, the schoolyard was empty. I used to hear the happy sounds of children's voices rising in the chaos of joy. I hardly saw children anymore, as if they had all left the planet.

This shelter-in-place order must have been harder on children in well-populated areas. Here, families practiced social distancing by hiking, fishing, or canoeing. A few still jogged, yet most of our sidewalks were empty.

The large gossiping parties of my feathered friends moved away, and not too far, a comfortable distance as if they too practice social distancing. When

I followed, they shifted away again. Now I spoke softly, letting them know it was OK. I meant no harm.

I'm no expert on geese; I've learned their behavior, figured out the dynamic. The loudest honker gives a sharp warning, is in charge. I read that bird conversation depends on the age of the goose. The oldest of the rank honks out orders and the others follow.

I NEVER THOUGHT I WOULD BE LIVING WHERE, ON ANY GIVEN DAY, I MIGHT glance out my window to see a family of black bears strolling down the street, heading for the river. Yet this spring, during the pandemic lockdown, the black bears were bolder, coming out more often than ever before. Folks living here are intimately familiar with our family of bears residing in the woods just up the road. When you run into a bear, it's as uncomfortable for you as it is for the animal.

My neighbor Gregory Norris, a writer, lives at the very edge of the woods. He has had many misadventures with bears. One warm day, as he sat on the sunporch, the largest bear tried to get inside, destroying the porch door. If this had been the city, the bear would have been hunted down. I shudder to think what could have become of the creature. Gregory had to fix his door, and while not happy about that part, he did not begrudge that bears sometimes act like bears.

Down the street, the local pastor walking her dog encountered Mama bear. When they startled each other, the dog barked; Mrs. Bear ran off. Most of the joggers and walkers carried cell phones, with an app whistle or horn.

It was spring—bears were ravenous. The local newspaper warned people to take down feeders, as the bears would destroy them to get at the seeds inside. The last thing you want to see outside your picture window is a hungry bear devouring birdfeeder seeds while watching you.

Some days the geese called *me* from my studio. I rushed outside. The cold wind was biting. I tucked my hands inside my sweater. Now, once again, I was suspended in sensory splendor watching their dramatic acrobatic ballet soaring gracefully into the white sky, diving, and spiraling before a backdrop of dark snowy trees. I don't believe there is a more beautiful sight.

I yearn to share this moment with all who suffer. So I offer up a prayer for the dying and wish I could change the world.

JUDI CALHOUN is an artist and writer who lives in Berlin, New Hampshire.