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Skyline Sketches: The Yellow Lily

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Skyline Sketches

The Yellow Lily

At age 6, I lived near Cobbetts Pond in then-rural Windham, New Hampshire. To me, flowers in bloom existed for one purpose: to be picked. One day, I picked half a dozen lady slippers, *Cypripedium acaule*, which sprouted among the deep, shadowy realms beneath the tall eastern white sap pines, and presented the bouquet to my mother. Horrified, she told me it was a crime to pick them—a long-standing myth, the threat equal parts truth and fiction. Our local orchids, designated the state flower in 1991, are protected. But in 1970, at any second, I was convinced we'd hear the shriek of police sirens, and I'd be carted off to jail. I've never picked or so much as approached a single lady slipper in the 50-plus years since that incident.

The three meadows near our house on Armstrong Road bloomed every summer with wild buttercups, black-eyed Susans, white oxeye daisies (*Leucanthemum vulgare*, or “day's eyes” in the original vernacular) and, in the deep thickets near the swamps, wild geraniums with their delicate, pale purple blossoms. In late spring, if I felt brave enough to trudge through sedge to where the stream ran out of the woods and snakes lived in abundance, I'd find indigo wild irises. Also up there grew wild roses, the perfume of their small pink-white flowers bewitchingly sweet to inhale but their stems wreathed in the sharpest of thorns.

We left Windham in September 1978, and that mystical, beautiful land was lost to me except in my memories and dreams. But about a month before we moved away, I came upon one final wonder in those woods and fields that I had never encountered.

I was hiking up from Duncan Beach on Cobbetts Pond one late August morning, crossing the easternmost meadow where, near the swamps on that edge of the forest where an old well with a flimsy wooden cover was located, I came upon a small pool that hadn't been there at the start of summer but now was. The shallow pool was filled with murky standing water that had fermented in summer's heat. I didn't think it very deep, but it was vast enough to qualify as more than a puddle, and that water feature was filled with plant life. Round, flat, elephant ear-shaped leaves drifted atop its surface, and one pale yellow flower head not yet fully opened protruded above the murk like a submarine's periscope.

I had come upon a lily pond in the wild, there at the outer edge of the big woods.

This discovery fascinated me. Lilies, here? I'd never seen them before growing among the swamp where cat-tails thrived in abundance, or near the shore of the lake. The yellow pond lily (*Nuphar lutea*) is native to North Amer-

ica as well as parts of Europe, but on that day, I believed I'd come upon the rarest of wonders like a lotus blossom from distant Japan. The one lily flower, still mostly closed, became an instant obsession. I was 13 that morning, but the old boyhood urge to pick the lily because it was a flower, because it was beautiful, possessed me. Never did I think I *shouldn't* pick it and let it bloom where it was. Claiming that lily would make it real and not simply a figment from a lost boyhood summer day.

The lone yellow flower floated well beyond my reach. I had no plans to wade through the stagnant muck to procure it, and so I paced, fumed, and worked out a possible strategy. I searched for a fallen tree branch, hoping to hook the lily and drag it closer. I located a decent pine branch, stripped off all the dead needles and underbranches except for one, and moved to the edge of the water, my sneakers sinking into the damp earth at the periphery. I extended the branch, hooked the plant, and pulled. The yellow lily, its leaves, and the root network anchoring it to the pool drifted closer, closer. I reached out, managed to grip the flower by the base of its long, jade throat, and snapped it free of the rest of the plant. Then, walking in wet sneakers and itchy all over from mosquito bites, I started for home, the rare prize in hand.

Only that yellow lily didn't look like much of a trophy or victory. The orb of the unopened flower ball never bloomed fully, turned brown around the edges, and sagged in its vase. In the flurry of activity over moving, no one but me paid it any notice. And even before I'd entered the house with it, I'd wondered—and do to this day—whether left alone to bloom, might *two* or more have sprouted in the little pond?

—Gregory L. Norris



Yellow pond lilies. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

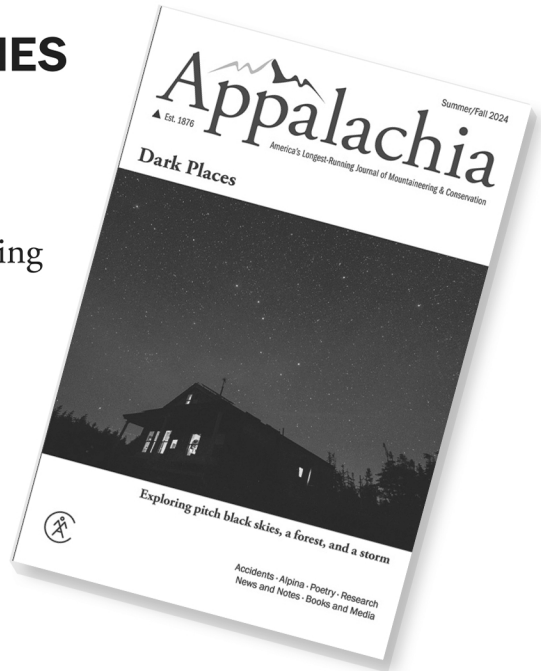
GREGORY L. NORRIS is a prolific writer of many genres, from science fiction to horror to space opera—and the occasional nature memoir. He lives in Berlin, New Hampshire.

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