

A Salamander's Tale, by William Cullina

Recently, I visited a rainforest exhibit housed in a state of the art conservatory. Vermillion songbirds flitted through palms and cecropia trees while iridescent blue morpho butterflies glided through the moss covered, plaster branches of an imitation strangler fig. The rush of falling water mixed with the occasional whirr of fog jets spilling manufactured clouds high overhead. Though well done and highly educational, the experience was really nothing like being in a true rainforest, where I felt somewhat like an ant thrown suddenly and violently into a bubbling, swirling, joyous cauldron of life. Nature reaches a fierce intensity in a wet, tropical forest. It is grand, enveloping, and absolutely impossible to ignore. Perhaps that is one of the reasons that we harried, over stimulated Americans are so captivated by rainforests. Perhaps, too they satisfy our desire to see the biggest and best: the deepest lake, the tallest mountain, the bleakest desert, the highest diversity of life. For those of us trying to promote conservation and publicize the plight of rare species, rainforests certainly get peoples' attention. In comparison to the real thing, the exhibit was rather small and tame, though I did have at least an inkling of that sense of immersion I remember from the real rainforests of Ecuador.

The patch of forest I live in northeastern Connecticut is also rather tame when compared with the rainforest. It contains neither tall mountains nor deep lakes, and though the tree canopy does occasionally flash with the orange of orioles or the scarlet of tanagers, most of the birds that live here are brown or gray. There are a few butterflies around in spring and summer, but mostly we have moths. Tan moths, bark-colored moths, black



and white moths, silver moths. There are big moths I can recognize and little moths that I cannot. I try to leave the outdoor lights off at night so as not to distract them from their amour, but occasionally when we come back from a night out, the wall beneath the porch light is festooned with myriad moths as well as craneflies, and beetles. The blend of species changes through the season, and I am bewildered by their diversity. Dr. David Wagner, a lepidopterist and moth expert at the University of Connecticut has counted over 600 different species of moths in his backyard only about 20 miles from my own. Six hundred! This is over a quarter of the 2300 odd moth species native to Connecticut (compared with only 127 butterflies). It boggles the mind. This does not include the untold beetles, flies, mosses, fungi, or invertebrates that number on into the thousands. We have 14

species of trees in our woods, including some large black cherries and one robust pignut hickory. You can find many of the woodland wildflowers common in these parts here – Canada Mayflower, wild oats, goldthread, partridgeberry – and a few less common ones like rounded shinleaf, wild yam, and rattlesnake plantain.

One of the things that attracted us to this land was the abundance of wetlands. There is a swamp near the road and another huge one to our east, and a ½ acre vernal pool bordering our neighbors to the south. Thus I was not surprised to find wood frogs, leopard frogs, and spotted salamanders crossing the driveway last spring, or an abundance of pleasantly plump toads hunting for slugs in the leaves. The real surprise came just this fall, when my 3 year old son, Liam and I were cleaning up by the drive. I lifted up a flat of dogwood seedlings I had intended to plant all summer, and Liam asked “What’s that, Daddy?” There in the damp earth was a female marbled salamander, a species of mole salamander that I have only seen once before. I knew it was a female, because they have silvery blue marbling over a shiny black ground. The males have much brighter white markings. Though it ranges over much of the eastern US, it is generally reclusive and uncommon. It reaches the northern limit of its range in Massachusetts, where it is considered Threatened, and New Hampshire, where it is considered Endangered. Unlike all the other mole salamanders, including the yellow and the blue spotted species, it breeds in the fall. Stirred by heavy rains and cooling temperatures, the adults leave their damp lairs to head for the vernal pool of their birth. Here they mate, and the females remain to guard the eggs until the pool floods and the juvenile salamanders hatch. These overwinter and leave the pools the following spring as the pools dry up. (For fact sheets on marbled salamanders and many other rare and endangered species visit www.nhesp.org)

Finding this salamander was a sign that perhaps our attempts to tread lightly on this land are succeeding after all; a hopeful sign that biodiversity and careful human habitation do not have to be mutually exclusive. In addition to respecting wetland buffers, we have been careful to leave the majority of the upland areas forested, and I left most of the fallen trees to decay naturally and provide suitable lairs for salamanders and others, as well as seedbeds for shrubs like mountain laurel.

I was thinking about this marbled salamander as I left the rainforest exhibit a few weeks ago. It truly brought home to me that you don’t have to go to the tropics to find biodiversity and rarity. There is no doubt in my mind that the wondrous tropical forests are under threat from a burgeoning human population need to be protected.

However, we cannot neglect the less flashy but still bewilderingly diverse and complex forests and swamps in our own backyards. It’s plainly hypocritical to criticize the people of Brazil or Madagascar for cutting their forests, interrupting natural processes and converting habitat to human-managed forms of land use while we continue to do exactly the same. Though our woods may not be the grandest on earth, this is where we live, and this is where we need to start. Hopefully this little amphibian will help Liam that we do not really own this land, but merely share it with others both large and small, and I hope, too, that our autumns continue to ring with the delicate, muffled patter of salamander feet marching down their ancestral pools to breed.