

Discovering Your Sit Spot

Have you ever found yourself out walking in a gorgeous, natural place but you're missing the best part of the experience because your mind is racing with thoughts? Many of us never get to fully appreciate where we are because of these mental distractions. And the really interesting thing about this is that the natural world responds in kind. Jon Young, teacher, tracker, naturalist and author of Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature, calls this kind of walking a *bird plow*. In other words, just as our thoughts are noisy, so are our corresponding physical movements. Most people tend to make their presence known in an extremely intrusive manner. So, not only do we not notice the vibrant, natural world that's all around us; at the same time it is consciously retreating from our unwelcome impact.

However, once we can settle into a Sit Spot, everything changes. We get quiet, slow our breath and just notice what is all around us! It might begin with observing an industrious ant busily dragging a hugely outsized morsel of food back to its hidden nest. Or maybe we become aware of a garden spider's web just above our heads, catching the early morning dew and reflecting off multi faceted rainbows of light, allowing us to marvel at the ingenuity of this perfect design. Or we might just begin to feel the soft breeze on our faces and notice that it carries the sweet whiff of spring's first ceanothus blossoms. Maybe, as we become more familiar with our spot, we discover that a grey fox often sleeps under the valley oak tree at the edge of our meadow or a red-shouldered hawk likes to perch at the top of the western hemlock on the hillside behind us.

Now imagine doing this numerous times. In spring, we may discover where the ant colony is and notice the tracks of a hungry skunk that has come overnight to dine upon it. As the season changes to summer we may even get to see the fox with

her playful pups in tow or the hawk giving it's young their first hunting lessons. And, by fall, we might find the light, tan colored orb sack of that same garden spider attached to a nearby willow branch. In winter, those same ceanothus bushes, now bereft of blooms and bare branched, may have become precious habitat to beautiful migrating gold finches. One of my most dramatic discoveries was to find that the cacophonous sound coming from below my Sit Spot along Papermill Creek was actually river otters in full and passionate mating mode.

This process of connecting with nature isn't a radical concept. Humans have been doing it since we became upright. Historically our very lives have depended upon us being able to be aware of and to blend in with our surroundings. This ability simultaneously allowed us to be extremely successful predators and to avoid becoming someone else's prey. One might say that our brains are hardwired to be connected with the natural environment. Anthropological research shows that the Kalahari Bushmen, indigenous people of South Africa, have very highly attuned senses and are actually better at problem solving than many more "civilized" cultures. So being observant in this way keeps our minds lively and bright. In his book, Last Child in the Woods (Changing our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder), Richard Louv, columnist, scholar and social policy consultant, makes the case that our young ones absolutely require being outdoors for the healthy development of their senses –to foster learning and creativity.

Having a Sit Spot can be the beginning of a whole new relationship with the natural world. To avoid the *bird plow* we can also practice using *owl eyes* or wide-angle vision. This allows us to take in a much larger peripheral view in a softer and less invasive way. (Many animals get nervous when looked at directly.) Another way to be "coyote" (stealth) is to practice *fox walking*. This is at a much slower than normal pace where the heel goes down first followed by the toes. This enables us to

walk almost silently across the ground. Again, the idea is to blend in and to become a way more intimate and natural part of our surroundings. This is when nature really begins to reveal herself to us.

In these busy and stressful times, we can all benefit from having a sense of place to ground us and keep us aware of the magic that is just outside our doors. And, if this weren't enough, having one's own personal Sit Spot is a totally delightful experience! If you are interested in learning more about Sit Spots (and some coyote tricks for blending in) please join us for a West Marin Free School class offered on Saturday, March 19, between nine and noon. Call Susan Prince at 663 8717 for more information.