



Short Ears, Long Tales

Courte Oreilles Lakes Association

The Poetic Tree

Allison Slavick
Contributing Writer

*I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree*
– Joyce Kilmer

When is the last time you read or heard those lines from Joyce Kilmer's poem? The sentiment goes on to herald *A tree that may in summer wear/a nest of robins in her hair, and Upon whose bosom snow has lain/who intimately lives in rain.* Seemingly old-fashioned? Yes. But poems and trees bring value to modern-day, every-day life. Skeptical about the value of poems? William Carlos Williams wrote, *It is difficult to get the news from poems/yet men die miserably every day/for lack of what is found there.* Those words appear toward the end of "[Asphodel, that Greeny Flower](#)," a long poem Dr. Williams wrote in 1955. An Asphodel is a lily-like plant that appears in no fewer than sixteen poems, evidence that plants of all kinds inspire poetry. And a common method of learning and remembering any subject is to use metaphor, or to juxtapose two unlike things: hence, poems and trees.

Kilmer wasn't proclaiming about any particular tree, but many, many poems have been written about specific kinds of trees found around the world and around Lac Courte Oreilles. If we skipped poems about trees in the tropics, the southern US, Asia, and Africa – everywhere but the Upper Midwest – we'd miss out on poems about the banyan, date, spice, mahogany, and hundreds more. But there would still be an abundance of poems about our native trees.

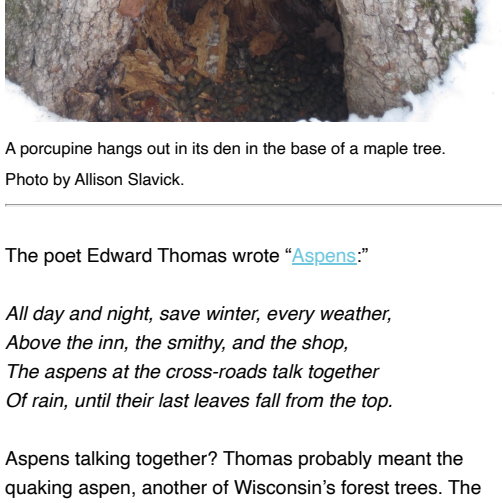


Pileated woodpeckers use the insects found in white pines as a food source. The holes they pound into the tree are later used by flying squirrels, bats, and birds as nesting cavities. Photo by Emily Stone.

There is so much about trees that is worth knowing – how to identify them, their natural history, their roles in complex forest ecosystems, the reasons behind their scientific names, and even their physiology. In the poem "[Native Trees](#)," W.S. Merwin lamented *Neither my father nor my mother knew/the names of the trees/where I was born.* One of the most famous poems of all time is about a common north woods tree most everyone can identify. Robert Frost wrote in "[Birches](#):"

*When I see birches bend to left and right
Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
I like to think some boy's been swinging them.*

With its white bark, the paper birch or white birch (common names for the same tree) has horizontal corky, dark stripes called lenticels. A lenticel functions like a pore: it allows carbon dioxide in and oxygen out during photosynthesis, the process by which plants make food using sunlight. We depend on the oxygen trees produce for our very survival.



A porcupine hangs out in its den in the base of a maple tree. Photo by Allison Slavick.

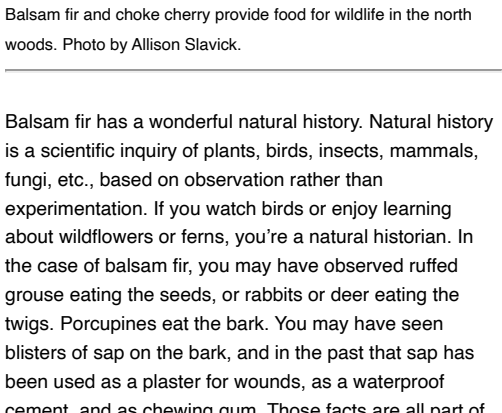
The poet Edward Thomas wrote "[Aspens](#):"

*All day and night, save winter, every weather,
Above the inn, the smithy, and the shop,
The aspens at the cross-roads talk together
Of rain, until their last leaves fall from the top.*

Aspens talking together? Thomas probably meant the quaking aspen, another of Wisconsin's forest trees. The tree tops of quaking aspen sway to and fro in the wind, and the leaves tremble. The scientific name of quaking aspen is *Populus tremuloides*. "*Populus*" refers to its place among all the poplar trees, and "*tremuloides*" refers to those trembling or quaking leaves. A quaking aspen could be confused with a bigtooth aspen, but the "teeth" on the leaves of the bigtooth aspen are, as you might expect, bigger. Bigtooth aspen is *Populus grandidentata*. Look at the scientific name – it's often a clue about the characteristics of the plant. Bigtooth leaves are among the last to emerge in the spring, much later than quaking aspen. Both share this characteristic: the leaf stem is flat, not round, and somewhat soft and floppy. That feature allows the leaves to flutter in the wind.

The contemporary poet Leo Larry Amadore began the poem "[These Trees](#)" with *Slender, singular, filamentous fir, /Yellowing larch -- these trees/Do not speak but seem to sleep,* and concluded the poem with *Dissimilar dark fir, /Lone, yellowing Larch.* "Compare and contrast" is a tamarack is, as he says, dissimilar from a fir, which would be dark green. He struck gold with "yellowing," a beloved feature of the tamarack. Look for tamaracks in bogs, where they turn a deep golden color late in the fall. The tamarack is the north woods' only cone-bearing tree that loses its leaves (needles are an adapted form of leaf) in the fall, just like maples, birches, oaks, and other broad-leaf trees that give us brilliant fall colors.

In "[The Fir-tree and the Brook](#)," Helen Hunt Jackson wrote, *The Fir-Tree looked upon the stars, but loved the Brook!* The poem is a strange and sad love story and metaphorically, as a tall tree in the north woods, the fir does look upon the stars. The balsam fir is a common cone-bearing tree – a conifer like the tamarack. How to identify it? The tree has a pyramidal "Christmas tree" shape, and the needles are in flat rows along the branches. The only tree you might confuse with a balsam fir would be a black or white spruce. Not sure? Shake hands with the tree branch. If it's picky and you have to let go, it's a spruce. If it's soft to the touch, it's a balsam fir. Habitat helps with identification, too. Black spruce is a neighbor to the tamarack – you'll find them growing together in bogs.



Balsam fir and choke cherry provide food for wildlife in the north woods. Photo by Allison Slavick.

Balsam fir has a wonderful natural history. Natural history is a scientific inquiry of plants, birds, insects, mammals, fungi, etc., based on observation rather than experimentation. If you watch or enjoy learning about wildflowers or ferns, you're a natural historian. In the case of balsam fir, you may have observed ruffed grouse eating the seeds, or rabbits or deer eating the twigs. Porcupines eat the bark. You may have seen been used as a plaster for wounds, as a waterproof cement, and as chewing gum. Those facts are all part of the balsam fir's natural history. Poems and trees: two things worth knowing.

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INVASIVE CRITTERS

Chinese Mystery Snails and Banded Mystery Snails



These snails have been in the LCO lakes for several years, but COLA has received recent complaints about large numbers dying and washing up on shorelines.

From Daniel D. Tyrolt, EPA-GAP Coordinator, LCO Conservation Dept.:

"The prolific growth in population of these snails [[Chinese Mystery snails](#) (top picture) and [Banded Mystery snails](#) (bottom picture)] is a likely indicator of pollution (excess phosphorus) from such things as fertilizer and increased runoff into the lake due to increased impervious surfaces in the watershed.

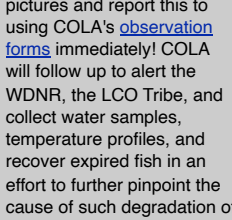
"These critters are grazers and love nutrient rich environments, and they feed on that green algae you see on the bottom of the lake, decomposing matter, diatoms and even live plants. They will even go into nests of fish such as bass and eat their eggs or any other fish eggs they find on the bottom. If any near-shore areas (littoral zone) are experiencing any type of increased nutrients, they will really thrive and then, when they die off in large numbers and wash up on shore, they create a mess.

"So to sum it up increased eutrophication in the area could likely be providing more food for them to grow in prolific numbers and then die off. If you are seeing more algae on the bottom and rocks along with more detritus (plant matter/debris) that is a likely reason they are becoming more prolific in the area since there is an abundance of food for them."



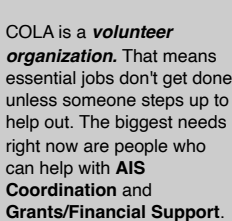
SEE ANYTHING WEIRD?

It's that time of the year again when the deteriorating water quality in LCO presents its most destructive and alarming evidence - algal blooms and fish kills. Lake water temperatures and phosphorus fed algae production are currently at their peak. The out-of-control algae production may or may not manifest itself in the form of an "algal bloom" depending on precise conditions, but, as this over-abundance of algae begins to die off, the decomposition process consumes available lake water oxygen that can and has resulted in fish kills, particularly for the LCO cold-water species cisco and lake whitefish.



If you observe green water or algal mats on the surface or floating or dying fish...it is imperative that you take pictures and report this to using COLA's [observation forms](#) immediately! COLA will follow up to alert the WDNR, the LCO Tribe, and collect water samples, temperature profiles, and recover expired fish in an effort to further pinpoint the cause of such degradation of the LCO lakes.

Please do your part to help enhance and preserve the LCO Lakes!



LCO NEEDS YOUR HELP

COLA is a **volunteer organization**. That means essential jobs don't get done unless someone steps up to help out. The biggest needs right now are people who can help with **AIS Coordination and Support** and **Grants/Financial Support**.

But if you have special talents in other areas such as communications, web design, fisheries biology, recreation, water quality, environmental mitigation, social services, NGO operations, ... or even something we haven't thought of yet but you think we should be doing, please step up.

COLA can provide all training and support to do these essential jobs. Contact communications@cola-wi.org if interested or you need more information.

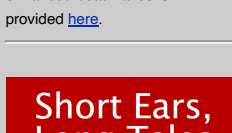


LCO WATER QUALITY SUMMARY FOR 2019

Here's a quick glance at the state of [LCO's water quality in 2019](#).

700 FT SETBACK REQUIREMENTS FOR ENHANCED BOAT WAKES

A ordinance boat wake ordinance became effective on November 12, 2018. To view the ordinance [click here](#).



A higher resolution map of the 700 ft setback requirements for enhanced boat wakes is provided [here](#).

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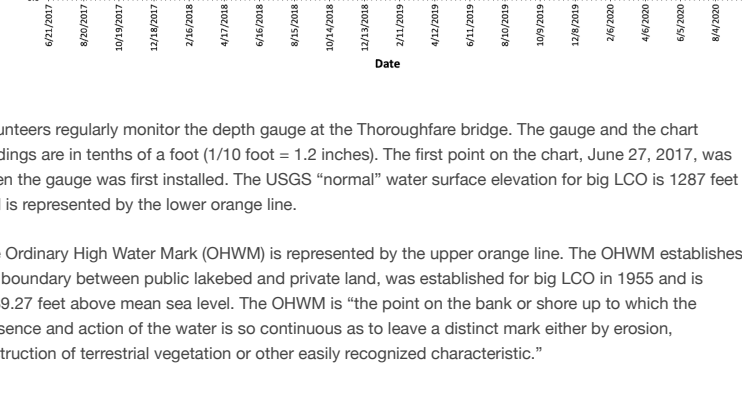
[ARCHIVED ISSUES OF SHORT EARS LONG TALES](#)



Allison Slavick works as a consultant to nonprofits all over the country, especially museums. For fifteen years she directed the Cable Natural History Museum, and previously worked as a scientist at the New York Botanical Garden and the Smithsonian Institution. She mountain bikes, skis, and picks berries near her home on Crystal Lake in southern Bayfield County. Questions, comments, or suggestions for future articles may be sent to her at allison.slavick@gmail.com.

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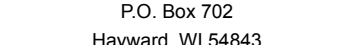
LCO Water Depth Recorded at Thoroughfare Bridge Gauge



Volunteers regularly monitor the depth gauge at the Thoroughfare bridge. The gauge and the chart readings are in tenths of a foot (1/10 foot = 1.2 inches). The first point on the chart, June 27, 2017, was when the gauge was first installed. The USGS "normal" water surface elevation for big LCO is 1287 feet and is represented by the lower orange line.

The Ordinary High Water Mark (OHWM) is represented by the upper orange line. The OHWM establishes the boundary between public lakebed and private land, was established for big LCO in 1955 and is 1289.27 feet above mean sea level. The OHWM is "the point on the bank or shore up to which the presence and action of the water is so continuous as to leave a distinct mark either by erosion, destruction of terrestrial vegetation or other easily recognized characteristic."

Periodic readings are recorded as accurately as reasonable. The water itself is in perpetual motion, not only flowing downstream but rising and falling due to waves, the current in the channel, the wind which can actually push water and "stack" it toward one end of the lake or the other and the seiche effect caused by the gravitational pull of the moon and sun.



COLA Mission: 1) to protect, preserve and enhance the quality of Lac Courte Oreilles and Little Lac Courte Oreilles, their shorelands and surrounding areas, while respecting the identity of property owners and the rights of the general public; and 2) to consider, study, survey and respond to issues deemed relevant by COLA's membership.

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