

Accompanied Melodies

The singing wilderness is the most important aspect of the Boundary Waters for Olson. He believes that “more important than the places I have seen or what I have done or thought about is the possibility of hearing the singing wilderness and catching perhaps its real meaning” (10). This melody is the reason for canoeing and portaging all day; it makes the difficult excursion worthwhile. Olson seems to have a superior knowledge about this singing and he believes that we are all looking for the music. He states that, “we may not know what we are listening for, but we hunt as instinctively for opportunities and places to listen as sick animals look for healing herbs” (7). Olson knows that it is our need to experience wilderness that motivates us to venture out. He holds the singing wilderness up on a pedestal, and travels deep into the wilderness, leaving behind all civilization, just to get a glimpse of silence and the power it holds. The silence in nature and the sounds of plant and animal life make up Olson’s concept of the singing wilderness.

The Boundary Waters served as an eye opening experience for me. I was familiar with the idea of the wilderness singing, but I did not know if I would experience it. Olson made it sound like a rare occurrence, so I was not holding any expectations, and as a result, I was pleasantly surprised at how often it entered my inner ear. I experienced it while silent, in the dead of night, and during the daylight while the sounds of human activity were rampant around me. The singing wilderness is not reserved for the nature lovers and enthusiasts. Anyone can experience the melody if they clear their mind and listen.

Our first night on Sawbill Lake was one filled with excitement. Everyone wanted to get out and experience the outdoors. At this point we were still 'social camping' and making friends. Existing in human nature is the desire to explore, so we wandered to the edge of the water to see where we would be spending the next week of our lives. There was an area with rocks jutting out into the water



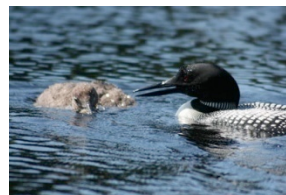
that we decided to sit on. Then something truly amazing happened. All sixteen of us subconsciously agreed to be silent. Something immense is needed to convince sixteen restless young adults to be quiet, yet it

happened. I found myself staring peacefully at the lake and taking in the natural beauty. I quickly realized there was a ringing in my ears. There was no wind blowing through the trees. The water was the calmest I have ever seen. The animals in the wilderness seemed to have taken our understood oath of silence, as there were no calls or rustling feet. Our very breathe and pulses seemed to have been concealed. I was experiencing silence for the first time in my life. This eerie comfort was so strange to me, but I could not bring myself to break it. The wilderness was in my head. The sky was perfectly reflected on the seamless water, giving the illusion that I was surrounded by heaven, floating through peace and serenity. Though unexpected, I had witnessed the singing through the

silence it offered. Instead of hearing the singing wilderness, I had become a part of it.

The first time I really appreciated the sounds of the wilderness, I was in my tent. Lying awake at night seemed like a setback at first because I knew that I needed to be well rested for the next long day. I decided to put my worries aside and just listen, which turned out to be a rewarding experience. Since I was inside my tent, I had lost the ability to absorb the world around me through sight. This

must have intensified my hearing because I started to really take in the wilderness. The loons were calling at changing intervals. The wind danced through the trees branches. I could not hear the water, but that just made



Picture By: Sandra Matthews

me picture it all the more. The passive atmosphere was enticing. I could hear an unfamiliar call in the distance. I thought it must have been a wolf. Nature seemed so far away until an animal started scurrying around my tent. I was suddenly plunged into my singing wilderness. I could tell it was something large by the sound of its paces. The animal walked within a foot of me several times. This was a different wilderness than I had experience thus far. Before it was all wind, waves, distant calls, and the sound of my footsteps on plant life. Now a close relation of mine was exploring my presence and adding to the beautiful music. Unlike the animal, I was frightened. Adrenaline pumped through my veins as the animal repeatedly circled my tent. The sound of my heart beat joined in with the chorus. The animal left as harmlessly as it came and my nerves were restored. I was given a change to be close to sounds. The scampering footsteps mingled

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with the sounds of wind, howls, and loons. My pulse slowed and the singing wilderness slowly coaxed me back into relaxation and peaceful sleep.

I was writing in my journal the next time I heard the wilderness sing to me. There was a comfortable flat rock, with the most astounding view, that had been calling me all day. I found myself watching the water and contemplating it, instead of writing. On the right beautiful trees met the splashing shoreline and contrasting

on the left,
remnants of
a forest fire



Picture By: Garrett Jenzen

flourished

with new life. By chance one had lived and the other was given rebirth. As I pondered the random natural selection in nature, I became increasingly aware of the rocks below me and the occasional birds above. The water was alive with loons and waves. The wind was jumping through the trees. I realized there was laughter from the campfire area behind me. Someone was throwing rocks into the lake a few meters away from me. A little off into the distance another group was canoeing and looking for a place to camp. I welcomed these would-be distractions and smiled. Unexpectedly, human activity was not taking away from my wilderness experience. I wondered if anyone around me was feeling this music, but I realized that they were not. This singing wilderness was left for me to enjoy. The human activity and living environment functioned simultaneously. The birds called and canoeists talked. Fish swam and the group paddled. Though

unorthodox, the sounds normally considered “noise” were adjoined to make something magical. The wilderness was still singing, but this time it was accompanied by humans.

My last night on the boundary was full of emotion. I was ready to be home, but I still wanted to soak up the last bit of wilderness I could. A group of us sat by



the camp fire after the sun had gone down, and the others had gone to sleep. We spoke calmly about the trip and about our relationships with each other. Between our speaking were

long gaps of silence where I was left to stare at the stars and listen to the crackling of the fire. During this increasingly religious moment, I was experiencing the singing wilderness in the silence again. I felt as if I was being consumed by this mystical collection of stars. The sound of the fire seemed to be the only earthly thing holding my feet to the ground. Just before I got too wrapped up in this composition, someone’s voice would pierce the silence and we would share our experiences with one another. Then I would look up and repeat the process. I felt like the others must have been feeling something because the pauses in our conversation were lengthening; this was a beautiful end to a great trip. The sky was clear and inviting. The singing calmed me for the last night and our group dispersed for bed. The wilderness seemed to be telling me goodbye.