



## A RESOLUTION FOR 2024: SLOWING DOWN TO LOOK AT NATURE

By Eric Dinerstein

The pace of technological change seems to speed up with each passing year. Just in the past twelve months we have seen the explosion of ChatGPT and generative AI, moving us closer to when machines assume a lot more human activities. Quantum computing lurks on the horizon with the potential of making AI even more powerful. Tesla's Optimus Gen 2 robot seems even more human-like than did the first iteration, and machines like it could soon handle even more tasks that are dangerous, repetitive, or do we dare admit, too difficult for humans.

But as computers and the AI software that runs on them speed up, our species may find our way to a healthier, more sustainable biosphere and future for humanity, not by speeding up, but by slowing down. For it is only by taking it slow that we are able to observe nature and fully appreciate our connections to the natural world. And there are enormous benefits in doing so, one that Optimus 2 or Optimus 10 will never know: the opportunity to allow our experience of nature to calm the turmoil inside of us and, most importantly, to appreciate the awesomeness of the natural world.

Awe is one of the most fundamental—and un-machinelike—emotions our species can experience. A recent study by scientists at Johns Hopkins found that almost three-quarters of participants in a survey said they experienced awe, or had been awestruck, most frequently from encounters with the natural world. It does not have to be gained observing a double rainbow from the rim of the Grand Canyon, or bursts of lava spouting from Hawaii's volcanoes. We can feel a sense of awe watching a beaver felling a tree along the Potomac, or a bald eagle harassing an osprey to release the fish in its talons, or a wood duck preening in afternoon light, or a giant male snapping turtle breaking the surface of the canal as it mounted a female, just as its ancestors had been doing since the time of the dinosaurs. These were all scenes in nature that played out right in front of me over the years as I walked or rode my bike along the Potomac. A knowledge of natural history was helpful in identifying what I was seeing; but also essential was my willingness to slow down and look. The male wood duck spotted far away and without the aid of binoculars could have been dismissed as a mallard drake if I had not stopped to examine the silhouette and then the head feathers more

closely. The snapping turtle could have been a log in the water as I whizzed along on my mountain bike if I hadn't hit the brakes for a second look.

So that is my New Year's resolution. To hit the brakes more often, and look more closely, to slow down. The practice of slowing down when in the wild can be seen as an offshoot of what is known in Buddhist teachings as the Sacred Art of Pausing. As Tara Brach, our local teacher on this matter, puts it: *"Through the sacred art of pausing we develop the capacity to stop hiding, to stop running away from our experience. We begin to trust in our natural intelligence, in our naturally wise heart, in our capacity to open to whatever arises."*

And to rediscover our sense of awe for nature, that is another resolution worth considering. A sense of awe may be one of the most useful and reassuring traits we have retained from our days moving across the savannas of East Africa as primitive hominids. Awe opens us up to possibilities of seeing the natural world and a heightened sense of beauty, the amazing designs as a result of evolution, and a growing sense of humility as to our place in the grand scheme of things. But how do we keep that connection in a world of high-speed computers, noise pollution, and light pollution taking away our view of the Milky Way and the planets?



Illustration by Trudy Nicholson

Over the next ten installments of Local Nature, we shall take our heron-like qualities and bring them to the banks of the Potomac, featuring the species found along the eddies and in the pools and currents of our beloved wild river, in what will be the last year of this column. Eleven years have

passed since I began this project, writing about local natural history, and it has been ever so rewarding. In large part, I have seen these columns over the years as a means to focus a spotlight on the exceptional talent of Trudy Nicholson, who has faithfully illustrated every article. But, for me, the demands of my day job—which ironically involves more and more about computers, computer vision, and AI in the service of protecting nature—has so increased that it seems appropriate to draw this column to a close at the end of 2024, or at least take a pause for a year.

In the meantime, let's move down to the shores of the Potomac and see what we can find that can put us in awe of wild nature.