

A Holiday Look at Nature

On This Thanksgiving: "Who Cooks for You?"

If you decide to take a Thanksgiving stroll around dusk, don't be surprised to hear a local resident hooting from the treetops. Up above could be one of the more common nocturnal birds in the neighborhood, the Barred Owl. The big trees bordering Cabin John Creek and the floodplain forest along the Potomac offer nesting holes for this bold predator, and our backyards serve as their prime hunting grounds. In fact, recent studies show that Barred Owls are increasing in numbers in settled areas. One reason may be that they find food easily here, feeding on rats and a wide variety of other prey.



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Barred Owl

You will likely hear the Barred Owl before you see one. Birders note that if the song of the White-eyed Vireo sounds like a generous "I'll-pick-up-the-beer-check" and that of its common but elusive cousin the Red-eyed Vireo resembles a taunting "Here I am. Where are you?", the Barred Owl's characteristic hoot has been described in the literature as a deep

and repeated "Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you-all?"

As marvels of the natural world, few birds can fly as silently as owls. Their feathers are uniquely adapted to muffle any sound as they approach and flap over their unsuspecting prey. Their large eyes and excellent hearing are perfectly tuned to hunt at night and pick up the slightest movement or faintest squeaks of rodents.

We should cherish the native Barred Owl as a neighbor but their recent expansion into another part of North America is causing much dismay. In western Washington, Oregon, and British Columbia, it now competes for food and breeding habitat with its smaller cousin, the already highly endangered Northern Spotted Owl, a species of owl that favors old-growth conifer forests. Federal and state officials are even exploring the idea of shooting Barred Owls to reduce the competition and thus lessen the threat of their more sensitive cousin's extirpation.

If there were still plenty of old-growth forest left for the Spotted Owls, the recent intrusion of Barred Owls might go unnoticed. But with 90% of the Pacific Northwest old-growth forests cut down by timber companies and other developers, the lack of safe breeding space left for a low-density predator like the Northern Spotted Owl becomes even more acute.

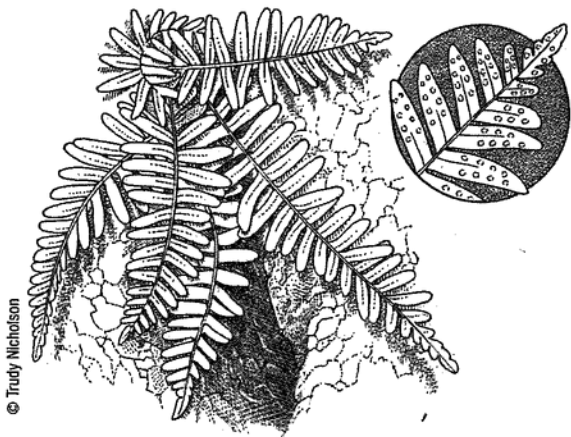
We have no such owl war in our region. So on this Thanksgiving, let us wish the Barred a fine meal of rat tartar and safe hunting without encountering the Great Horned Owl, another local. This other nocturnal resident, our largest member of the lineage, might make a meal of a Barred Owl, if it could catch one. Another lesson the Barred Owl teaches us: even the suburbs aren't completely safe.

Christmas Every Day of the Year

As the holiday season approaches and the days grow shorter, the woods around Cabin John seem lifeless and less inviting. Most of our native trees have dropped their leaves or, like the reluctant American beech, hold on to withered brown memories that hang like old tissues along the

branches. What better time to celebrate plants that stay green all year round?

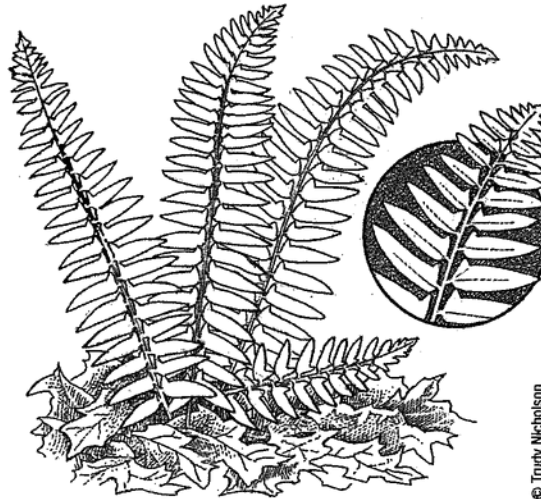
America's most famous naturalist/philosopher, Henry David Thoreau, once gushed over the "fresh and cheerful communities" of polypody fern that sometimes carpet flat boulders. To experience your own Thoreau moment, take a day stroll along Cabin John Creek this month, especially through any rock strewn north-facing hillside. A little depression, a shovelful of dirt, and a bit of shade and that's all a polypody needs to stretch out over the boulders to create an elegant mantle of green. To grow on rocks is no small feat for a plant. During summer dry spells, the foliage retreats a bit but springs back once more with the next rain. Look on the underside of the fronds for leaves with symmetrically placed brown dots, like a decorative case of the mumps. These are the reproductive parts, called sori, and their shape and arrangement help botanists to tell ferns apart.



Polypody Fern

Of the nearly sixty species of ferns that grow in our area, only four are evergreen and one in particular is often a companion of the polypody. Christmas fern is the most common fern in the forest; you can tell it by the dark green leathery fronds with a characteristic "ear" projecting up at the blunt end of each small leaf. It's a favorite of florists who collect them for holiday displays.

Ferns first appeared in the age of dinosaurs and some of the ones we see today look very similar to the way they looked 165 million years ago. Why change what is working so well? Aside from



Christmas Fern

being among the oldest living plants you will see on your Thoreauvian stroll, they are among the most widespread. Like other of the earliest forms of plants, ferns have neither seeds nor flowers, but rather reproduce by spores found in those sori. The tiny spores travel far and wide, a lesson I learned when a few years ago I stumbled across a royal fern—a local species I have growing in my backyard—happily spreading its fronds in a sun-lit swamp in Madagascar, where it, too, is native.

Florists can also thank evolution for another pleasing attribute of ferns: they almost never show signs of insect damage. Ferns that developed genetic mutations that made them unpalatable to herbivores were the ones that survived. As a result, ferns are full of nasty chemicals, and deer avoid the Christmas fern and the polypody, which is why both species still flourish throughout our deer-dominated forests.

Let the human foragers among us beware, too. Although gourmet cooks prize baby fern leaves, or fiddleheads, for a spring sauté, most ferns are toxic to humans and several are carcinogenic. Perhaps the only safe fern to eat is the ostrich fern, a common plant in the spring forest understory. But even these should be cooked for at least fifteen minutes to detoxify them. The twelve thousand species of ferns on Earth are some of the most elegant designs in nature. Sometimes, in Cabin John as elsewhere, it's best just to cultivate the aesthetic appreciation rather than the culinary. —