

I pulled into the drive on a drizzly May afternoon. I slowed into the last turn through the overgrown spruce. One branch, bent from the winter's snow, left just enough room to pass underneath. I'd need, I thought, to come out and cut it before the rest of the family came up in a couple days. The grass running down the middle of the two-track drive had grown high enough with the early spring to brush along the underside of my truck; one more cabin-opening chore to try to get done before the ceremonial weekend of putting in dock and taking down storm windows.

I woke the next morning to a clear, blue sky and cold that led me to stay under the covers a bit longer than I'd planned. After a cup of coffee and piece of coffee cake my mom had sent up with me, I pulled an old Swede saw off the shop wall and went out the drive to take on the few errant branches that might catch the roofs of incoming vehicles. The spruce along the narrow drive, once cut back when my grandparents were here from early May to October and had taken the time to tend to such things, had grown to make more a forest than a border. I cut a half-dozen of the lower branches that presented an obstacle to incoming cars or, heaven forbid, any emergency vehicles that might need to get in. Between cuts, I stopped to listen to an ovenbird and other spring arrivals calling from the willow and aspen along the wetland that borders the property.

Next was the grass. I opened the door to the worn and leaning outhouse, now incidental winter storage, and pulled out the old mower. After cleaning the spark plug and adding a bit of fresh gas, I opened the choke and gave it a pull. The neglected two-stroke engine woke from its winter slumber and started right up with a brief cloud of blue exhaust. I squeezed the clutch handle and took out down the drive. Two long passes down, and up, the middle of the drive, then to the edges. I had to take it slow, backing up a few times and pushing the mower through the taller, thicker patches of the mix of old lawn and encroaching weeds that give a buffer between the drive and the woods. As I took another pass, I stopped the mower just short of a group of fiddleheads, the unfolding shoots of early ferns, coming up along the edge of the wood. Amidst the ferns, I saw the

first light purple flowers of a low wildflower. I pulled the mower back and redirected the next pass, avoiding the new growth.

It is a fine line between a weed and a wildflower. As I had done the year before, and the year before that, I mowed just a bit less of our alleged yard.

I took a break and sat on the last step down to the lake with a glass of water. Looking up and down the beach, I noticed that this spring's late ice had pushed a new berm up against the lesser ridges of past years. I'd need to dig some of it out, just enough to get the dock and lifts in and give my uncle's grandkids a little stretch of beach to build sand castles. As for the rest, someone will inevitably in the coming days look at it and comment, "I'll get a rototiller and cut that down when I have a few days in July." But, as we'd done the last years, the ice heave would stay and continue to nurture the young spruce that had taken hold.

Despite our best ambitions, we may have come to be more responsive stewards of this place. In not devoting time and effort to fertilized green lawns and manicured beaches, perhaps we've given ourselves more opportunity on those cool summer early mornings sipping a cup of coffee down on the deck to offer attention to the place. In that simple act of paying attention to the place for what it is, perhaps we've come to know, to appreciate, and to love it even more.

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There was a time when such things as ferns and wildflowers encroaching the drive and spruces growing along the shore would not have been accepted. My grandparents, bless them for leaving us this place, were insistent on bringing the green lawns, and with it the pride and envy of the greenest and lushest of lawns, of the Midwest in the 1960's to their new home along a Northern Minnesota lake, and then even to the desert of Arizona.

We had, I concede, rhubarb pie and an occasional vegetable from a well-protected garden, even grape jelly from the row of vines that grew in the back yard. Gardens and lush green lawns, though, took time and attention. The spruce and ferns and wildflowers that have come up have done so for a simple passing of time and lack of effort better spent just being there, in slowing down and paying that attention to the mergansers and trumpeter swans that seem to have come back in recent years.

Restoration can, in many cases, be a passive process. In *not* deciding to cut more lawn and dig and rake out more of the beach, nature, it seems, has a way of reclaiming its place with little help from us. These non-decisions, though, have a remarkable impact on the quality of the lakes and maintaining healthy fish and wildlife populations, all enhancing the aesthetic and recreational value of our lakes, as well as the value of our lake home properties.

There are more homes, and larger homes at that, around the lake than there were forty-eight years ago when we first started sharing this place. Yet even with this increased development along the shore, there has been a marked improvement in water quality and water clarity on many of our area lakes. This improvement in water quality is due, in part, to stricter codes and enforcement on building and septic systems, but a good share of it can be attributed to those voluntary, at time even unintentional, practices such as letting the edges of yards be taken over by native wildflowers and letting the intermittent ice ridges become, in the eyes of both our family and the Minnesota DNR, permanent fixtures.

The ice ridges we'd neglected to dig out from past years are, as more permanent features, subject to a Minnesota DNR permitting process to remove. A permitting process, though, has been the least of considerations when we examine the bank and shore each spring when we return. It simply turns out that the spruce that have come in from our lack of effort are, when you sit back and look at them, quite beautiful trees. In the wildflowers and native ground cover, there are seasonal purples and yellows rivaling most any cultivated garden. Each year as we push a boat lift out from shore, we find a new addition, a surprise; an oak here and there, a red pine now obliging us to push the track from the boathouse over a few inches to clear the trunk, all seemingly thriving more than the lawn and garden of the past ever did.

That the spruce and wildflowers are doing so well along our bank can be credited in no small part to the ice berms trapping sediment and nutrients from runoff into the lake. Without the barrier created by the ice ridge and new growth, the phosphorus, nitrates, and other nutrients would have run into the lake, feeding the once heavy summer algae blooms of the past that gave the surface waters a greenish complexion in the heat of August. With little, if any, effort on our part, these nutrients are now collected behind the

ice ridges, feeding instead the spruce and other native vegetation that has taken hold. As the vegetation becomes rooted, it serves to stabilize the shoreline and reducing erosion, providing a natural filter for runoff and reducing the damage caused by high water and storms.

Fish and wildlife also benefit from these practices of restoring a more natural shoreline. A variety of birds find shelter, habitat, and food along the shoreline vegetation, including our more iconic loons, herons, and waterfowl. Among the young spruce along our shore, I've found chipping sparrow nests and listened to yellowthroats calling in the early summer. I've watched dragonfly nymphs crawl out of the water and up the trunks of shoreline trees to split open along their backsides and fly away on their newfound wings. The insects and amphibians making home in the buffer zone along the shore feed game fish, all going towards a healthy, more complete ecosystem conducive to the reestablishment of such things as smallmouth bass and the ospreys and bald eagles we now see on almost a daily basis.

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I set my empty water glass on the back porch and went back to finish the mowing. I mowed around the old, broken swing set that had been there since we've had the place, the same I played on over 40 years ago, and just enough of the old back yard for a group of kids, the next generation, to toss a football. I avoided, though, the rich mix of native plants and trees that had come up voluntarily in what had become mostly woods beyond that.

I shut the mower off, taking a moment for my ears to readjust to the quiet. A downy woodpecker knocked from a dead birch we'd thought about cutting down last year. I remember last summer going as far as firing up the chainsaw, then looking up when some movement caught my eye. A red-breasted nuthatch had ducked into a hole, about twelve feet up in the dead tree, with a beak full of insects for its vocal young. We unanimously decided to leave that tree until the fall, until we would be distracted by a warm late September sun that called us to take a short drive to Itasca or something else that seemed more important at the time.

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Much of the restoration I've noted on our lake property was done by simply not working so hard to maintain and manicure lawns and beaches. There are, though, things you can do to take a more active role in preserving shoreline and lake water quality. With a bit of planning, you can use the natural features of your property and create an aesthetic buffer zone along your lakeshore. By modest landscaping and planting desirable native cover, shrubs, and trees, you can develop a self-sustaining shoreline landscape that can not only provide for erosion control, water quality, and wildlife habitat, but also add to your enjoyment and value of your property.

If you'd like more information on how you can take a more active role in sustainable shoreline management, check out the Hubbard County Coalition of Lake Associations (COLA) website at [hubbardcolamn.org](http://hubbardcolamn.org). Among their programs and resources, Hubbard County COLA annually offers a variety of beneficial trees and shrubs for sale through its "Restore the Shore" Tree Order Program in partnership with the Hubbard County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD). The Minnesota DNR also offers a number of materials to help you get started including their "Score Your Shore Citizen Shoreline Description Survey" guide available through their website at [dnr.state.mn.us/scoreyourshore](http://dnr.state.mn.us/scoreyourshore).

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