



THE ART OF SILENCE

Story and Photos by Rob Stimpson



The Art of Silence

This is an essay about silence, how it affects us, as well, how it benefits us. If you live in urban areas and have experienced the solitude of the forest, silence will resonate with you.

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Cover Image; Petawawa River, Algonquin Prov Park

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Lake of 2 Rivers, Algonquin Prov Park

It is late October, the forest is quiet. There is very little activity on the surrounding lakes with the exception of a few migratory birds taking a break before continuing their long journey south. The air is still, clusters of leaves are holding on trying to avoid the inevitable. The beech and oak trees are the suspects. Their leaves do like to stick around until nature decides to unhinge them from the tree or the new growth of spring pushes them out.

There is this silence now, hard to deny how quiet can be so still. Heading down the trail a few more yards, I stop, again pure silence. I listen closely, but I am hard pressed to hear anything. Is it me? Or perhaps it's the time of year when most of the birds have departed on their migratory journey and others getting settled in for the coming winter. Have we forgotten how quiet can settle our mind?



Georgian Bay

What exactly is this silence? Has noise become part of our lives? Are we now wary of this tranquility? We all know about beauty. Flowers, rainbows, sunrises are a few of the examples of the magnificence of nature's beauty. What about silence? Is it under the same category, or is it something else?

There was a time in our past when silence was keeping pace with the time-less rhythms of nature. I liken it to the peace and quiet one feels when heading out on a canoe trip. There is something special about paddling a canoe into the backcountry where you hear nothing but the sounds of nature. Escaping from the office and our day to day routines, the mechanized sounds are left behind.



Georgian Bay

One embarks into a world of calm as the canoe slides effortlessly over the water before coming to rest on a sandy beach. It is a natural quiet. Pines reach high along the shore, a wetland provides an impressive backdrop, with a few slices of exposed granite. Camping next to a backcountry lake, the forest wraps around you. It almost feels like you are in the centre of a giant amphitheatre. You are captivated in this tranquil setting, stretching out on the granite, feeling the warmth of the sun and solitude. Silence is welcome. Early evening casts a stillness over the lake. Near by deer are sleeping with one eye open; they're never quite sure what the next minute will bring. A coyote stretches and stands, revealing his well-concealed den in the late afternoon light but becomes invisible in the shadows of the early evening. Cattails whisper softly as they move back and forth in the last of the day's breeze.



This is nature's acoustic system, rarely loud. A bull frog rivets its call. A distant sound wanders its way toward me; it is the wind going on a journey somewhere. There is a quiet euphoria sitting by the lake. I watch the last of the day's light dance with the water. Digital noise that is so prevalent in our daily lives settles down allowing our brain to fully absorb the surroundings. No artificial sounds, just nature.

The natural world has so many different audio expressions. Each one attached to a specific action like ice forming on a still late November evening. It sounds like a guitar string in a high key note. How about spring peepers on a June evening! These chorus frogs with their chirping are the males calling to attract females; filling the warm spring evenings with their distinctive sounds.



Lake Superior

Henry Beston wrote a book in the late 1920s called “The Outer Most House. It is a story of living in a cabin on the beach experiencing the day to day rhythms on Cape Cod before it became a tourism destination. He talks about nature’s ambient sounds. This quote speaks volumes.

“The three great elemental sounds in nature are the sound of rain, the sound of wind in a primeval wood, and the sound of outer ocean on a beach. I have heard them all, and of the three elemental voices, that of ocean is the most awesome, beautiful and varied.”



Our world seems to have gone past those times. Are we looking back? Hardly, it's usually full steam ahead! Yes, there are exceptions, but even places with cottages are loud these days, with high-speed motor boats, jet skis and dock parties. How can that be? Isn't the cottage an age-old place to rejuvenate, rest your mind and escape from technology? It seems, the sounds of leaf blowers, lawn mowers, and radios blasting the latest hits ricocheting across the water is now a part of our lives.

We are all guilty of raising the decibel levels to some degree. Can we not divert activities like lawn maintenance to mid-week, maybe early afternoon not late Friday afternoons, while others are sitting on their docks or backyards taking in the calm of the day? Why is there a need to invade the silence and space of others with a lawnmower or leaf blower at 5pm? Anything that makes noise is the new ubiquitous game in town. Why elevate our stress levels with one of the worst causes, loud noise?



Oxtongue River

When one lives in a large urban area where ambient noise is part of daily living, I get it. The brain accepts these sounds and they become white noise. They are integrated into our daily routine. Almost like the light of the night in the city, it's difficult to find real darkness in the urban wilderness anymore. Living in the forest for the past 20 years, on the edge of a lake, I know why the sounds of nature plays a big part and why this is so important.

Science shows us that noise pollution threatens the survival of a multitude of different animal species. They rely on sound from finding a mate, migrating, hunting and avoiding predators. Looking at the healthiest ecosystems that exist today, research shows they're also the quietest places.



Georgian Bay

In the fall of 2020, the journal *Science* published a report concluding that the coronavirus lockdown produced "the longest and most coherent global seismic noise reduction in recorded history" a months-long reduction in seismic noise of up to 50% across 77 countries, according to the study. All of a sudden, people from around the world began to notice the sound of birds, the rustling of leaves and what can be called, "The soundtrack of the planet."



Red Trillium, Lake of Bays

Maybe it's time to turn off our devices and just listen to nature's acoustics. Better yet, head out for a hike or a paddle at a park and just listen. We all need the beautiful, natural sounds of the wind, the woods and the water as we drift through a lake. Allowing these sounds back into our lives can help lift off the heavy burdens of our day to day lives in the 21st century. Beauty and calmness of our natural world is what so many of us seek in order to enjoy a healthy life! If we all do the same, you won't be disappointed.



"I go to nature to be soothed and healed, to have my senses put in order."
John Burroughs