

Finding Millers Creek Patricia Chargot, April 2018

"I had always been delighted at the prospect of a new day, a fresh try, one more start, with perhaps a bit of magic waiting somewhere behind the morning." – J.B. Priestley (1894-1984), author of the Time Plays, which explore various theories of time.

These days, I find some of my best bits of magic exploring the Huron River and its creeks.

The meandering river system still feels like a mystery two years after setting off, as a new HRWC volunteer, on my first field trip to collect water samples and take flow measurements in Millers Creek, in Ann Arbor. I hope it always will feel like a mystery.



The Huron and its 24 major tributaries tumble through seven counties. They are mostly hidden from easy view, like the massive underground root system of a vast, ancient forest. Trying to mentally piece together the gigantic jigsaw is overwhelming, even unachievable. Yet nothing has sensitized me as powerfully to the natural world since I took a birding class in 2008 at the University of Michigan Biological Station, in Pellston. I had never looked at a bird through binoculars before. A whole new world opened up and I saw 110 bird species in a single week. Birds became my friends.

So, too, have the river and its side creeks and their side creeks. I'm no canoeist, and creeks can be too shallow and debris-ridden to navigate. I tend to stay on shore when I'm not wading into water to do HRWC fieldwork, which is its own kind of fun.

Off-season I try to explore a few new pieces of the puzzle. Last year, in my first Earth Day essay, I recounted poring over the HRWC online map of the Millers Creekshed and realizing that the east branch originates so close to my home that I could walk there in minutes. So I did -- that very day -- and discovered a creek so small it was little more than a slash in the soggy grass. I followed the rivulet for about 150 yards until it entered two mini-pipes. It passed under a driveway, spilled into a patch of wetland, and disappeared under Plymouth Road to meet up with Millers' west

branch somewhere downstream -- I had no idea where -- on its way to the main river in Gallup Park.

Last fall, I studied the map again, and set out to find the start of the west branch, on the south side of Plymouth next to the big blue water tower. It skirted a strip of densely wooded undeveloped land, flowing southward through a broad -- and, no doubt, tick-infested -- patch of waist-high weeds. I stopped.

Late last month, on a fluke, I resumed my quest to further explore Millers after it dawned on me that the weeds would be winter-worn and tick-free. I had a window! I set a new, more ambitious goal -- to find the meet up of the two branches -- recruited a friend, and headed into the U-M North Campus Research Complex, on the south side of Plymouth, east of Huron Parkway. The west branch skirts the NCRC's eastern edge.

For the record neither of us had any idea that the complex was a badge-wearing part of campus. Visitors are required to "possess a valid Mcard" and "display it at all times," as I later read on the NCRC Web site. A site map indicated Millers' east branch as a thin blue line, but the west branch had been deleted -- perhaps to discourage creek-walkers.

The creek was so dry that we couldn't even find it in the carpet of matted weeds, which dead-ended at an access road, where a cartoonish little blue bus stopped, apparently for us. When its doors opened I waved it on; it was maybe 30-feet ahead, but it didn't budge.

The shuttle turned out to be a driver-less vehicle -- my first! We had strayed into Mcity. The guy in the driver's seat wasn't the driver at all -- he was one of several passengers. We finally realized how we were perceived: as mere obstacles in the road. We stepped aside, and the shuttle passed.

Confident that we would re-find the creek, we crossed Baxter Rd., an east-west link between Huron Parkway and Green. On the way, we stopped to talk to a young woman outside the U-M Health System North Campus Administrative Complex, just above Hubbard Street. She was amused to learn that we were hiking Millers, just to see where it went.

"I used to do that when I was 10!" she said, laughing.

Below Hubbard, the terrain dropped dramatically; there were so many fallen tree trunks, limbs and branches that we had to force our way through them, step over them or crawl under them; it was slow-going, but extremely pleasant. Devoid of greenness, the hard landscape -- all buffs, beiges, ochers, umbers, cocoas, and blacks -- revealed its true contours. The stream's banks were 10 to 15 feet high in places and nearly perpendicular to the ground. The gully was surely carved by glaciers. But

as I later read in the HRWC profile, it is “high water flows cutting down the stream bed through the movement of rocks and sand” that account for today’s “tall, vertical, and eroding stream banks.”

“This brings down neighboring trees and further exasperates the erosion.”

The profile described the creekshed as one of the smallest in the Huron River System, just 2.4 square miles in size. It’s also “the steepest tributary by far,” with an average drop of 52 feet per mile; the gradients of most of the other tributaries range from 10 to 15 feet per mile. Future explorers be warned: Millers is “extremely flashy,” so stay away during rainstorms. It may not be Utah’s hoodoo-jammed Bryce Canyon, but under certain conditions it’s probably possible to get swept away there.

I really thought we had found Millers’ meet up at a spot where what we assumed was the creek’s west branch was flanked by an enormous slab of concrete, above which we could glimpse student housing. Culverts are commonly cross-drains for ditches. But they are also used to transport creeks that have been artificially buried. The slabs turned out to be the first kind of culvert; we were nowhere near the meet up, but well below it, though we didn’t know it at the time.

Two days later, I went searching for the meet up again, this time with the HRWC map in hand. I parked in the lot of Busch’s Green Road store, walked south on Green to Baxter, and turned right; the map showed the branches flowing together just above Baxter, about half way to Huron Parkway.

I found the meet up about 30 feet above Baxter, obscured by a tangle of scrub trees adjacent to the barrier fence of a U-M facilities services building. Beyond, I could see the pitch-black perimeter wall of Mcity -- and beyond that the pastel-colored Potemkin-like facades of the testing ground’s faux Main Street.

The juxtaposition was surreal; the creek’s branches joined so gently; they were a little harmony of aliveness, swirling around the sides of a large round boulder. If it had been warmer I would have ventured into the shallow water and climbed up. No culverts, no empty pop cans, no candy bar wrappers. Just the silent, sun-dappled earth leached of color, soon to green up again.

Time slipped its reins, as if I was in a Priestley play, and the past and present flowed together, like the creek’s twin branches. It was “a bit of magic behind the morning.”

Back on Green, headed north to Busch’s, I veered into a U-M commuter lot and discovered a violently eroded stretch of Millers’ east branch. The creek cut west along the lot’s northern edge, disappearing at a fenced-in dirt road with an open gate and a “No Trespassing” sign. I waved down a U-M truck headed through the gate, and asked the two guys inside if there was a creek behind the distant tree line.

“We never go back there,” one said, adding: “It’s just brush.”

On the way back, I stopped again along the stretch of creek I could get to and watched a squirrel scamper up a tree, then casually leap to another, like Tarzan. I also came upon two very long and large bones, which I hope were deer bones. They were smooth and white, like the skeletal forms in a Georgia O’Keeffe painting, which she thought of as portals linking heaven and earth. They also conjured the quiet creepiness of the horror film, “Blair Witch Project.” I got out of there.

I recently began to think of the river system as a “mind expander,” after reading an article with that very title in the April 2 New Yorker. It was about Andy Clark, a philosopher and cognitive scientist at the University of Edinburgh. Clark has postulated that the human mind is a lot larger than what resides inside one’s skull -- that it “extends into the world,” writes author Larissa MacFarquhar.

“A brain develops and rewires itself in response to its environment throughout its life,” using many kinds of external “scaffolding,” such as paper and pens, maps, smartphones, laptops, cars, other people, and probably even pets.

Exploring the river system has made me smarter. I really do feel it’s rewiring my brain, expanding my idea of reality and deepening my sense of oneness with the world. It has enhanced everything: my grasp of local geography; my creativity, my ability to visualize my goals; my capacities for joy and wonder; my left brain-right brain connection; the plasticity of my aging mind -- I get all of this from the Huron, of which I believe I am a distinct and even important part.

A year ago, on April 15 -- I wrote down the date in my journal -- I awoke in the middle of the night and started thinking about something HRWC volunteer Ron Fadoir once told me in an interview. Ron, an environmental planner with the Oakland County Water Resources Commissioner’s Office, has walked or waded thousands of miles of Southeast Michigan’s three major river systems -- the Huron, the Rouge and the Clinton.

He said he no longer thinks of a river as just the water in a riverbed, but as part of all the water in the world, which is billions of years old and limited in supply, condensing and evaporating and condensing again; falling as raindrops, spilling off roofs onto driveways -- all of it running downhill with a vengeance into ditches, culverts, storm drains, sewers, creeks, rivers, the Great Lakes and the oceans.

I had just gotten up to urinate, and had the sudden realization that the urine that had just run out of me into the toilet was coursing through the Ann Arbor sewer system to a wastewater treatment plant to be aerated, filtered, disinfected and released into the river.

I am the tiniest of creeks! I am a watershed unto myself, daily ingesting aqua that drains back into the river system from whence it came.

By now fully awake, I pulled a book from my nightstand, thinking I would read until I got sleepy again. It was “Women in Praise of the Sacred, 43 Centuries of Spiritual Poetry by Women,” edited by the poet Jane Hirshfield.

Opening it at random to P. 193, I read the single-page entry on Uvavnuk, a 19th Century Inglulik Eskimo woman. It began with a story about her transformation into a shaman, written by Knud Rasmussen, a Greenlandic/Danish polar explorer and anthropologist.

“Uvavnuk had gone outside the hut one winter evening to make water,” Rasmussen wrote in his Report on the Fifth Thule Expedition of 1921-1924.

“Then suddenly there appeared a glowing ball of fire in the sky, and it came rushing down to earth straight towards her. She would have got up and fled, but before she could pull up her breeches, the ball of fire struck her and entered into her.

“At the moment she perceived that all within her grew light, and she lost consciousness . . . She got up again, and without knowing what she was doing came running into the house,” singing this song:

*The great sea
frees me, moves me,
as a strong river carries a weed.
Earth and her strong winds
move me, take me away,
and my soul is swept up in joy.”*

Happy Earth Day to everyone at the HRWC and to all those who have experienced the inspirational power of water, especially those who know themselves to be part of the mighty river.

—Patricia Chargot