

Reading the Land like a Poem

Thin strokes of white clouds float in a mellow blue sky, filled with bright sun on this early summer morning. *Watch for snakes*, Chris declares as we enter the dark forest. *So dry, they're looking for water*. I scan the floor of brush, trying to detect the presence of snakes—from triangular-headed venomous pygmy rattlers, eastern diamondbacks, and coral snakes to harmless oak, rat, and black snakes in their natural camouflage.

We wear t-shirts, long pants, socks, and boots even though early June is summer on the Florida Panhandle, to protect ourselves from ticks and tree branches. It is baby bird season for her where she's up around the clock and managed to get away for an hour. As I waited for her on the dusty red dirt road, sun high and demanding, I sweated through my clothes. Now in the shaded woods, my skin has cooled and dampened.

*See those bald cypress*, she points to scattered great-trunked light-gray trees bearing long wisps of Spanish moss like stringy toupees. *That means wetland. The trees probably border a sinkhole, most likely not an underground stream. The ground is so dry right now, we can't see the water.*

*Rattlers were in our yard yesterday*. She tells how even the snakes are desperate for water.

*A pygmy was almost just about hidden near my house*, I say, remembering the coiled small snake at the edge of the grass.

Chris indicates a titi tree, telling me that bears enjoy the nectar and says *I hope we don't surprise a bear*.

This parcel of land is for sale, and we are checking to see if it might work as a place to move her wildlife rehabilitation center. We head north, searching for signs of the wetness of the land, calculating if there are enough buildable acres to house acres of recuperating wild birds and animals. Right now, her small six acre center in Crawfordville, accommodates injured and orphaned pelicans, deer, baby birds, raccoons, a goat, and a blind horse, and at times, just about every species of bird and wild animal in North Florida, including bald eagle; barred, barn, and great horned owl, red shouldered hawk, turkey buzzard, coyote, otter, and bobcat.

Here in the woods, we see evidence that this spring is one of the driest on record for the region. So we need to be sure to locate signs that show how the land might flood in a rainy season or severe storm. This land is a few miles from the Gulf of Mexico and the Ochlockonee River, close enough to be deluged by a hurricane. But now wildfires rage to the north in Georgia; close, and to the west, on St. James Island, and south to the Okefenokee Swamp where even the riverbed has burned.

*Long leaf pine over there*, she nods toward a stand of towering thin-trunked trees. *That's a dry area, close to wetlands*. I wish I could tell the difference between a long leaf, slash,

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and sand pine without studying guide books. I listen carefully as she continues. *See the moss on that pine trunk? That shows the tree has been underwater. There's the water line—that dark area. The water has gone up to that mark—about eighteen inches when it rains.* She closely reads the land like a poem—identifying details, recognizing what it all adds up to.

*This area has been seriously timbered,* she says. As soon as we step over an invisible line, the temperature cools about ten degrees and the wind picks up. *This must be where the private land borders the Apalachicola Forest.* Giant pines sway slightly, revealing a contrast to the private parcel where the young short trees lay the barren land open to the sun.

I show her a skull I discovered when I was checking this area to see if it might be suitable for her center a few days earlier. *See where the teeth are in back of the jaw? It was a deer,* she says. We see patches of red, gray, and brown hide a few feet from the skull. *A hunter got it. This is where he dragged it out,* she says, pointing to the litter of hide scraps along the sparse grass.

*Whip-poor-will. Whip-poor-will,* the namesake bird trills. I hear no car or truck noise, just wind through the pines. I marvel that there are still stretches of Florida where there are no automobiles or radios; where the only sounds are tree-wind, insects, and birds marking territory, calling for love, or singing to sing. Two native Tallahassee friends have told me they don't hear whippoorwills in town anymore. This land sits about thirty-five miles south of Tallahassee, several miles from the coast of Dickerson Bay, and a couple of miles from Highway 98 which is more like a country road than a highway.

I strongly hope that this is the right land for her center and that she can stretch further than she can now. Since this place borders the forest, she would be able to release birds and animals directly, rather than transporting them to big woodsy tracts. But it has to be dry enough for a large structure that could be used for classes and a multitude of walk-in cages, wading pools, and several small buildings that would house dozens, sometimes hundreds, of orphaned baby birds and recuperating animals.

Chris' long dark braid keeps hair out of her face; she holds back branches for me. We've been swatting away yellow flies that sting hard, leaving irritating itchy red bumps. *That cypress must be a hundred years old,* she says, pointing to a majestic tree a couple of hundred feet away.

The way to this part of the private woods has been cleared for a trail and might not be high enough for a passable road. A good rain, let alone a tropical storm or hurricane, could make it impassable.

As we carefully walk through dry brush and rough twigs, I joke about how I keep going back and forth about selling my car, and she says in her throaty voice, *Like the tide; change your mind every six hours.* I laugh and wonder if I would have known what that meant if I hadn't lived on the water.

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*It's supposed to rain on Friday*, Chris says. She'd like to come back then and see how wet the land will be to decide if the ground is dry enough for the center. She's seen enough signs today that show this parcel of woods might flood.

Heading back out of the woods, our feet look for toeholds on the slope. We crawl around masses of dried brush, stoop under low limbs, hike along the clearing. As soon as we reach the dirt road, the heat immediately covers us, the sun much stronger here under bare blue sky.

Her violet-gray eyes even larger now that we're out of the woods, Chris points to tracks in the red dust. At first they look like bobcat prints. Then she shows how they're round, no indentations. *These could be dog. No, see how they're pointed? Fox.* I marvel at how she knows.

Wakulla County is a thousand miles from Chelsea in Staten Island, New York, the land onto which I was born where forest lay across the road, the river flowed at the end of the yard, and swamps and marshes surrounded our street. Chelsea allowed infinite space for minds and spirits to roam, nurturing my sister and me to become poets. It raised me to love my wild soul and to recognize uncharted places where it can roam. I am grateful for conversant guides like Chris that help me read these lands.

Boots covered in red dirt, I get into the oven of a car. The ground is dry, the sky is bright. In a couple of days, the clouds will open up and pour. We'll be back after the storm, walking through the wet land, reading its lines.

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Chris is Director of The Florida Wild Mammal Association, which is entirely funded by donations and grants. The Association is still looking for its "Forever Home."

For more information, visit <http://www.wakullawildlife.org/>

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