

## OCTOBER IN THE PORCUPINE MOUNTAINS

By Leslie Askwith, Writer-In-Residence, October, 2007

I spent the last two weeks of October in the Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park. The woods were wet from a long period of rain, lush with mushrooms, fungi and moss and nearly devoid of people. I stayed in the artist in residence cabin, hiking the park's trails during the day and at night reading and writing by the dim light of the gas lamp, listening to the quiet and occasional calls of night creatures.

The first afternoon I walked a short distance down the trail that passed by the cabin. Nearby was a giant hemlock that supported an entire small ecosystem. Four kinds of moss swirled around its base, spiraling up the trunk. Tiny white fungi climbed like steps. Rain dripped from the canopy, moistening bright green growing tips and splashing from one small platform to the next, landing on the little brown mushrooms clustered at the base. Slugs scraped away at food and a swollen branched lungwort lichen crawled across the trunk.

Further on I was drawn by a bright object lying on the ground, a single mushroom of dazzling red that had popped up from the dark humus beneath a hemlock tree. On the trail, rain drops lay puddled on a perfect yellow poplar leaf, each drop a clear pearl. Older leaves decayed on the path, mashed into the soil by the rain. A black mushroom sprouted from this muddle, old and worn, its gelatinous oozy cap dissolving. It still stood tall, as proud of its short lifetime of work as its crimson neighbor seemed to be of her smooth parasol and work yet to do.

Ecological balance evolves in response to needs, keeping those characteristics that are necessary to allow species to reproduce. So I wondered about the reason for such a brilliant red mushroom and the beautiful yellow of a fallen poplar leaf. My sense of delight, of personal troubles dropping away, of the first twinges of serenity were my human response to the wonder inherent in these small sights. Some characteristics like the stepped pattern of moss climbing a tree are purely biological, designed to capture water dripping from above. Others seemed to be purely delightful ... the luminosity of a raindrop ... the way soft rays of light angled through virgin hemlock. These provoked the sensation of a profound spiritual presence ... of wonder. Understanding the science behind the soft stickiness and rasping tongue of a slug or the miraculous adaptations of a lungwort lichen that enable it to live only where the air is pure, enhanced that sense of wonder.

I returned to my cabin that night, looking forward to two weeks with nothing to do but wander in this miraculous forest and spend my evenings in a simple room pondering and studying what I'd seen.

### OVERLOOK TRAIL

The next day I hike Overlook Trail. I leave a forest where trees are young and friendly, unimpressive, and enter a stand of old growth hemlock. It's perfectly still, a shady cathedral where a high canopy captures sunlight and a soft needle floor absorbs sound. Giant trunks

stand far apart, dignified, powerful. My steps release the aroma of pine in a state of damp decay.

A woodpecker flits and lands and pounds his beak against a dead tree. A drum echoes in the distance, probably another woodpecker pounding against a hollow basswood. I frequently see woodpeckers, well-fed on insects living in the dead trees left standing, as they should be in a healthy ecosystem.

A red squirrel darts by with a bright orange mushroom cap in its mouth, probably one of the waxycaps that cluster like shiny toys on the forest floor. Squirrels are harvesting this bumper crop in their scatterbrained way, running frantically about with bright ovals of mushroom caps clenched in their mouths. They wedge some into craggy tops of stumps and abandon others after a slight nibble as though distracted by another more enticing treat. The pores of a meaty looking Bolete cap are gnawed off by something with teeth the size of pins. Yellow mushrooms, sprinkled with clumps of cottage cheese, Amanita, are scattered, torn and gnawed. Forest creatures seem to be on a mushroom rampage.

Squirrels are not affected by the poison in mushrooms and large quantities of toxic types have been found in their winter stores. Other mammals raid these middens for food, a process charmingly referred to as kleptoparasitism (parasitism by theft).

These bright fruits are mere specks of the fungal organism, the smallest reproductive part poking above the substrate from a vast living web of fungi, a network beneath my feet connected to roots of all the living trees and penetrating everything dead. The mushroom is its brief act of sex, producing spores that enable it to move to other places. I help the process along, stepping on a puffball, one of the small gray marbles clustered on a log. Dust pours forth, millions of tiny spores. These spores will be scattered by the wind, may be carried aloft miles above the earth to land in other regions, spreading the species wherever the soil and weather is hospitable.

The Humongous Fungus, as it was nicknamed, was, for a while, a Honey Mushroom that was the largest organism on earth. It grew near Crystal Falls, about a hundred miles south of the Porkies. The web of inter-connected Honey Mushroom strands covered three acres, was estimated to be more than 1,500 years old and to weigh 100 tons. It's since been outdone, by another bundle of hyphae discovered out west, one that's 2,400 years old covering 2,200 acres.

It's a relationship, without which, neither fungi nor tree could survive. These mycelium are essential for survival of the forest, providing nutrients in exchange for the simple sugars produced in the green needles and leaves high overhead. On another drizzling day I carefully extracted a pure white mushroom, possibly a Funnel Cap, from the soft forest floor and came up with a mat of white threads and dead needles matted together as though stuck with glue. These were the mycelia that could be so helpful to living trees, but in this case were working toward a different end, that of decaying dead needles.

I stop to examine a group of fungi the deep rich color of eggplant, jutting like broad strong shelves from a rather fragile looking dead hemlock. Awed, I am unable to take in their color and shine, their powerful presence. A bearded hiker pauses to inquire as to whether I've

found something. Indeed, I have. But unable to supply a name, he turns away, dismissively. The encounter makes me cranky.

I climb the trail to a vista of uninterrupted wilderness ... a pays den haut, land beyond settlements, where petty concerns assume a more reasonable level against the context of a forest stretching to the horizon without any sign of civilization. A strong wind comes up and blows my concerns away.

As the days passed I saw the same fungi many times. They are thought to be of similar medical value as another of the same genus, Ganoderma (which grows on hardwoods). They can be purchased on eBay to be used as an antioxidant, to heal skin wounds, as therapy for cervical cancer and to promote good health. Knowing the name, Hemlock Varnish Shelf, didn't make them any more astonishing.

### LILY POND TRAIL

Lily Pond Trail is a little-traveled path that threatens to be obscured by growth, but suits me perfectly in my quest for solitude. I am alone on the path and it feels like I'm alone in the park.

I was reminded of the poet, Stellanova Osborn. I met her once when she was an old woman, living in a small apartment with her books and memories. She read aloud to me from her poetry, thoughts and words inspired by the natural beauty of the Upper Peninsula. Her expression and voice were filled with memories of joy found in the light, water and forest. She could have been writing about this trail in her poem "Toll".

You must hold a trail down with your foot  
If you want it to stay –  
It will not lie quiet and wait  
While you are away.

I am stopped by a Christmas display of brilliant red bead berries on bright green trailing partridgeberry. Further along a great flesh-colored fungus spreads along the cut end of an old tree. Soft mushrooms of the palest lavender push up dried and decaying maple leaves. I climb, sweating, past a fallen maple riddled with holes made by pileated woodpeckers, some the size of bread baskets.

I came upon a dead tree with so many ears poking from the trunk it looked like a forest gnomes' version of a telephone pole, listening to sounds from the forest floor. The fungi are Piptoporus, the same type found strung onto a leather thong in the pocket of the 5000-year-old iceman of the Alps. He'd been found preserved in an alpine glacier carrying his first-aid kit, perhaps to relieve stomach troubles caused by roundworms, eggs of which were found in his intestine. These fungi are still used to treat viral and bacterial infections.

### LITTLE CARP RIVER TRAIL

Here, old hemlocks rising in the sun and shade, with no fanfare, no explanatory signs, no neon lights announcing their majesty. They are just there, waiting to be discovered. My forehead and face feel smooth in the cool wind and dancing lights and green walls.

The Porcupine Mountains are 60,000 acres of designated wilderness, so trees such as these are protected from logging. It's one of the few large stands of virgin timber remaining in the midwest. Here, at least, the values of tranquility, awe and serenity have won out over the view that trees are so many board feet. The worth of compelling peace has been recognized as greater than economic value.

## PRESQUE ISLE RIVER TRAIL

Some kind of coral mushroom resembling a piece of an old man's beard, has been torn off a dead log and dropped on the ground. It's yet another weird growth form that I try to identify and even if I get it wrong, it's a thrill to have found it ... an introduction to a trail that's magical throughout.

Manido Falls sprays me with a cool mist as brown water pours over flat sheets of shale. The river roars off one sheet onto another ... then pours over the edge onto another layer and so on down this river-bed of shattered plates. Lofty virgin hemlock, 400 years old, lean over the river and in spite of numerous warnings about safety and cautions about violent undertows, the path borders perilously close to the edge of the bank. I walk upriver to more falls, stray into the forest-cathedral. A few rain-drops, not captured by the high hemlock canopy drip to the ground.

I am halted by a stump palace, an exquisite aged mound, blue-green with mosses and lichens and the tiniest hemlock taking root in its ancestor. Mossy elfin-sized foothills surround the base.

Three does cock big ears in my direction. Two scamper away, but the third looks over her shoulder at me with huge black eyes, watching as deer do. I run at her, flapping my bright orange poncho and shouting, intent on instilling some healthy fear of humans. Bored, she twitches her ears and trots off, nearly yawning.

I feel safe and whole beneath these old trees. The air seems big and still, solid, filled with sweet oxygen seeping from green needles overhead. It's air never breathed by another person or polluted by car exhaust or emissions from plastics or synthetic fabrics. The place feels as steady and strong as my grandfather's house did when I was a child.

Downstream, the water is diverted around to the west side of Presque Isle, leaving the east channel dry. I cross the river-bed, stepping from one level to another, crossing flat steps where shale has split in clean layers, like stacks of cards tilting this way and that. Snake liverworts crawl under ledges where it remains damp and dark. I can hear the river roaring above me, diverted from this channel for the time being. An otter has recently climbed out of the calm water and left a wet trail of paw-prints on the rock as it climbs up toward the river above. There is nobody here at all.

Along the bank, water seeps from between thin sheets of rock, nourishing fringed mossy green strips. On the island between the two branches, I find trailing arbutus and wintergreen gleaming in the damp late afternoon light. I feel melancholy. These are the same plant groupings that surround my husband's beloved cabin, where we spent time just before his death. A black bald eagle soars low overhead, huge in its proximity. It is so close I can see its eyes and beak clearly as it swivels its head, surveying the river.

I follow the calm inlet to Lake Superior and around to the river side where water is sudsy, covered with swirling white foam like small ghosts twisting and dancing on its surface. The suds are evidence of the frantic churning upriver, a force that has carved perfect scallops in the bedrock river banks, huge semicircular potholes like a row of giant washing machines endlessly whipping up suds that spill out into the surrounding river.

The forest service has built an elaborate series of walkways, allowing visitors access to the river without danger of falling in. I climb to the highest bench. The constant noise of the river makes me feel drained. Every muscle in my body is weak. The water roars, drowning out all other sounds, filling my head and replacing all thoughts with the sound.

#### ESCARPMENT TRAIL

The Escarpment Trail is a path through an eerie elfin forest of white and red pine, white birch and oak that are stunted and twisted like furtive gnomes by wind and weather and thin soil on the top of this mountain. Today the wind howls, it's cold and the sun is often hidden by clouds.

In some places it looks like Tom Sawyer abandoned his fence and ran through the trees with paint brush outstretched, brushing the small oaks with a band of white. The white is Whitewash Lichen, tiny bits of algae swathed in gauzy fungus, that's blown horizontally from tree to tree.

On the bluff above Lake of the Clouds, bearberry spills down the slope, each small leaf a shiny drop of light in the early morning sun. The lake water ripples and morning sun blinds and warms me at the same time so I can barely see with happiness. Blueberry bushes are turning red and juniper cling to rock.

Along the ridge through this alpine meadow the wind threatens to throw me over with its gusty strength. I lay down, spreading my limbs among the gray crusty lichens on the granite, trying to avoid touching any of them with my clumsy human body parts. Lichens grow so slowly, that I hate to set any of them back. I count five different kinds just inches from my nose and I am probably missing some.

Ten high school students from Minnesota slog by, stooped under loads of flopping wet gear, doggedly following their grim leader. They'd been hiking for six days in the rain, probably not noticing, by now, the lichens underfoot that may be hundreds or even thousands of years old. As they step, they pick up tiny bundles of algae and fungal spores on the bottom of their boots, bits that may be deposited later in suitable places, spreading the lichens to new places in the park.

Large black birds, probably crows, perhaps ravens, play in the wind ... circle, soar, fall, dance in perfect unison. I, on the other hand, would love to escape this incessant gale. The strap of my pack slaps my face and I cannot think so retreat to the quiet behind the bluff. Here, flowers are confused about the seasons. Spring and summer flowers blossom ... daisies, spring beauties ... others. I walk among the flowers and deer scat, and am stopped by a glossy green moss, gleaming among the dry brown leaves. Its leaves are so thin they are translucent. A pale spider the size of my pen tip climbs among water droplets listening on its surface.

#### BEAVER CREEK TRAIL

Beaver Creek Trail winds among crooked gray hardwood trunks leaning in friendly awkward postures... a gentle Japanese garden. A brook tumbles cheerfully alongside, chattering gaily like a joyfully gossipy companion. The path is wide and smooth in most parts, uninterrupted by potential snags to stumble over. I can walk happily as though walking were the thing rather the constant observing of what is underfoot.

Three fat bugs buzz and bump about at the bridge over the Little Carp River, orange guards with pin-sized guns. I pass unmolested to a marsh where a wren flits among grasses that gleam and rustle. When I sit with my legs hanging down towards the water, a ladybug snoops trustingly among the folds of my pants. Below, black water glides silently by and grasses are pulled smoothly by the current, like girls' long hair brushed by the stream. Eddies rise, twist and spin, tiny tornadoes in a watery wind.

The boardwalk through the marshy west end of the trail is an invitation too enticing to resist, a narrow path leading to hidden places in a wetland too mucky to penetrate without support underfoot.

I am completely alone as usual. On 48 miles of trail walked over two weeks, I encounter only 44 hikers and most of them in groups.

T.M.O. Mahadevan in "Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi," says "Silence is the eternal flow of language, unobstructed by words. I experience this language in the absence of human noise during my walks in the park, awed even by the curious bees and glistening grasses of this modest place. At various grand places ... Yosemite, Bryce Canyon, even the Taj Mahal ... I gazed at magnificent sights surrounded by the energy of people trooping along in large groups, posing for photos, pointing out various sights, chattering, laughing ... creating a distracting energy that disturbs my ability to feel wonder.

There are those who feel energized by people, who appreciate beauty more when sharing it with others. For them are the paved walkways, stairs and parking lots that allow access to many of the magnificent sights in this park. But I appreciate the less-traveled paths where I can feel the forest's unique set of vibrations, the gentle hum of a balanced ecosystem free to carry on without interference.

#### UNION SPRING TRAIL AND PART OF GOVERNMENT PEAK TRAIL

The Union Spring Trail climbs slowly along the Upper Carp River, a stream that falls through a cool and sunny gorge edged by volcanic bed-rock and old growth forest. A bench sits at the base of Trap Falls. Air bubbles float on the pool like a thousand glass Japanese net floats. The water's roar drives away thoughts.

Further along the trail, a platform extends out over Union Spring. In the deep water beneath it, groundwater bubbles up, stirring the bottom in small explosions of silt that sway in graceful coils. Water in the basin is so clear it looks like it's not there. If I jumped I'd be as surprised to encounter water as a bird is that crashes into a clean window pane. I am unnerved to see what I know is water but that looks like nothing. I feel dizzy as though if I fell in, I could slide into the narrow passageways that lead deep into the earth.

#### PINKERTON TRAIL AND PART OF SUPERIOR TRAIL

On the Pinkerton Trail, as elsewhere, lichens, moss, fungi and higher plants attack dead trees and stumps with a slow ferocity, penetrating tissue, feeding on it. Turkeytail fungi tackle every fallen tree with layers of workers, competing with mosses for substrate, advancing the trunk's decay. On an enormous fallen hemlock, Woodcrust, small flexible pink semi-circles fringed with white fur, the work horses of decay in old growth forests, grow alongside Artists' Fungi. On the upturned bottom side of the root mass several generations of Fairy Helmets dangle in clusters, gold and speckled in youth, then spreading their striped brown and white caps in maturity and hanging blackened and stiff in old age. A coating of golden velvet lichen covers roots, dirt and fungi ... decaying the decaying mushrooms. Were it not for mycelium of these fungi digesting the dead wood, I'd have been climbing over piles of trunks rather than mounds of dirt.

Brilliant green swaths of moss arch across the black smooth surface of a cut stump, strands of emeralds embroidered on black velvet. A monstrous flesh-colored fungus swells from the bark of a dead hemlock, fat and lumpy, spilling drops of water like sweat.

Small green wood sorrel surround the base of an eroding hemlock stump, mounting its flanks, like an army of small green Irishmen invading a castle. Eventually they will be victorious, reducing the stump-castle to an obscure bulge on the ground.

While dead plants slowly become part of the earth, old growth hemlock tower overhead. I move slowly and this is a long hike. My GPS confirms my notion.

I recall the group I met on South Mirror Lake Trail, several lean Michigan Tech students who caught up with me at the overlook tower at Summit Peak. They looked alike with their curly blond hair, T-shirts with comments about beer, hiking boots the size of small cars and backpacks bristling with straps and hooks. They clattered to the top of the tower, leaping from step to step and moments later thundered down again and disappeared down the boardwalk. These boys were intent on the physical challenge of the wilderness. They cover miles quickly, alive with the joy of being young and strong like the waterfalls of the Union River near my cabin, bounding tumultuously over the rocks. I stop for every marvelous thing like the quiet pool at the bottom, noticing the hemlock reflecting on the surface.

The trail breaks out onto a sunny bank high above Pinkerton Creek. At my feet, bright orange globs of Witches Butter seep from a dead root and tiny Turkey Tails climb single file up the trunk. In the river, water gurgles gently and I skirt a leaning cedar carefully to avoid sliding down the steep bank. I am on a narrow ridge, a finger that points to Lake Superior between valleys eroded by rivulets of run-off from hills in the park interior. I approach the river through widely spaced hemlock and cedar. Near the open space created by the creek, thimbleberry bushes grow, large translucent yellow leaves capturing the light in a luminous glow.

At the river an expanse of rushing water forces me to bushwhack upstream. Along the way I find evidence of the animals that depend on the stream ... streaky whitewash dropped by a bird perched on the dead limb overhead, knobby-knuckled long fingered raccoon tracks and black, wet and smelly scat, full of grasses and fish bones, recently deposited, probably by an otter.

I climb a bank, muddy with fall seepage, one of several along this trail. Rivulets and streams have cut steep-sided gullies on their path to the lake. Briefly, I bushwhack to the lake that glimmers through the trees, thinking I'll follow the shoreline, but the beach is far below and the bluff too steep. I clamber over fallen trees and stumps, so decayed they are leaf-covered mounds and sink into holes left by upturned roots. Bushwhacking makes me appreciate the trail.

The sun sinks low. Sharp rays gleaming among tree trunks blind me. I have a long way to go. I pause at a stump fluttering with snow-white mushrooms, perhaps Angels Wings, curly, waxy and soft. The mushrooms are my last stop.

The trail markers seem further apart than usual and are hard to spot in the fading light. The path is little-walked, tricky to follow. The forest is shadowy, menacing. At first I found the blue metal trail markers pounded into the trunks of living trees painful, like knives stuck into flesh and left there. Some trees had bled, dripping sap down trunks where it congealed. Thick bark has grown around many of these markers, enveloping them as the tree attempts to heal its own wound. The wounds disturbed my sense of peace. But now I find them comforting.

When the flat brown sign-board comes into view that announces the place I have left my car, my concerns vanish. The forest once again appears lovely and safe and I am full of confidence. According to my GPS, I have walked only 5.83 miles in 7 hours ... moving three of those hours and stopping for four, usually to hover over some small miracle.

I recall earlier in the week when a father asked me for a lift with his son back to their pick-up truck at the trail-head. Even though it was a beautiful Saturday, only three cars had come by. He was a little embarrassed to be caught in such a predicament. That wasn't their first difficulty. The boy, who was around 12, was anxious to tell of the dangers they'd faced the previous day. "Don't go on the Cross Trail," he warned. "We got soaked ... full of mud. Had to spend last night in a motel to dry out."

The forest service personnel will readily admit it's an unimproved trail. But I wonder if handling discomfort and stress in a wilderness may have been more valuable than any



pleasant comfortable outing. That boy knows he and his father can get out of a scrape. Such journeys should be a required rite of passage for every child.

## LOST LAKE TRAIL

Stellanova Osborn wrote in her poem, "Censors";

When I carry  
The woes of the world  
Into the woods  
Branches reach out  
And brush them gently off.

My mind whirls today as though a hamster spins its treadmill inside my head. I hurry onto Lost Lake Trail, anxious for the soothing influence of nature to have its effect. It's become an anti-depressant, quick-acting and free, without the drugged feeling of pills. I learn later this feeling is not my imagination. Negative ions are thick in forests, waterfalls, beaches and after thunderstorms, and once inhaled can increase serotonin levels that improve disposition, relieving stress and depression, and enhance energy.

The ground is speckled with perfect smooth lovely yellow leaves. A leaf falls onto my arm. More fall, onto my hair, shoulders, all around ... golden raindrops.

The trail climbs slowly and then edges a steep bank above Lost Creek. The creek, which is fed by the waters of Lost Lake, falls quickly, following that water-course with its perpetual chatter aimed at small boulders in its path, wearing them down in continuous erosive action that's been going on since glaciers melted away 10,000 years ago.

A creek spills down the west hillside. It is on neither the USCG nor the park map, so I hope it's not named. The creek bounces from rock to slope to rock and rests in a hot-tub-sized pool before flowing into Lost Creek. The possibility of an un-named creek in our well-mapped and labeled society enhances the feeling of being in a wilderness.

The air is cold. Ice skims small puddles of open water and freezes chunks of moisture-laden dirt seeping from the ground. I wade through dry leaves on the path, as noisy as an elephant, locked into the small world that is the sound of crunching leaves.

Butterflies called skippers fill the air, fluttering like dry pale pieces of onion skin tossed about by a faint breeze. I watch several creep from beneath a dry maple leaf and perch, unsteadily, their fluttering uncertain. They lift off, one after another, knocking into my legs and nearby branches before gaining equilibrium. One struggles, flaps its frail fine wings, slides down a leaf and flutters up again, then spills over the other side until it stops, its wings pressed together, still. I touch it gently, encouragingly with my pen, hoping to scare it to flight. But it does not move.

Those who rise, shudder and tremble about, filling the air with light jerky movement until some universal message compels them, all in the same instant, to grab onto sticks and cling long enough to regain stability until, all at once, they take off again. They fill the air with

wobbling flutters as though drunk on the sun's warm rays and smell of decay rising from the ground. Later I read that skippers on the prowl for mates, perch until an object happens by ... whereby they flutter off to see if it's a receptive female of the same species.

A beaver lodge is obscured by leatherleaf and raspberry canes growing thick in the sphagnum moss at the edge of Lost Lake. It is not so well hidden now that most of the bushes have lost their leaves. Water is shallow over the moss and has frozen. I stand on a small hummock with a spindly spruce and watch for beaver. Their route of movement between the lodge and open lake earlier today is easily traced in the broken ice.

I find a spot next to a hemlock far too large to reach around, where the sun warms my face. The ground is so soft with fine brown hemlock needles it is like balancing on a cushion. I realize that without effort or notice, my mind has become calm.

### LITTLE CARP RIVER TRAIL

On the Little Carp River Trail, I pass a yellow birch, its single trunk standing on a tripod of silvery legs cradling a decaying stump that is no longer there, having decayed to dirt and replaced by air. I come upon a grouse. It startles me, bursting away through the trees, an explosion of feathers. It lands, embarrassed by its fear as I am of mine, a gorgeous male, puffing its neck feathers and spreading its tail in a nervous show of bravado.

I wade through leaf-filled paths up and down knolls among huge hemlock and hardwood. At the Little Carp River camp-site, I come upon yet another enormous hemlock. It seems to be the most magnificent one yet, but then, they all do. Most of the mushrooms have disappeared ... the organism's brief beautiful sexual existence at an end for this year.

### AT THE CABIN

Back at the cabin, for a moment at dusk, yellow leaves remaining on a spindly tree gleam luminous against the dark hemlock, capturing a particular angle of the sun's rays. In a breeze, the leaves flutter like spangles on a belly dancer's hips, shaking madly shimmering, fluttering, until they fall. During this brief bright dancing time, they bring light to the dark hemlock forest, the last bit of color before winter.

As I make my short trek to the river where I wash up in the evening, I think of the wolves that are here. I peer up at the ridge beyond the river where one was seen, head down, feet splayed, silently watching. I'm not afraid exactly, but I feel its presence as a chill that lingers in the shadows beneath the hemlock around the cabin. I hurry indoors where a safe human space has been created of table, bed, chairs and warm wood fire in the stove.

Tonight the rain rattles against the roof and I wrap a blanket around my legs and another around my shoulders and resume my attempts to match scraps of moss and fungi against pictures and descriptions in my guide books.

Identifying mosses and fungi helps me see the variety and reading about their complex lives increases my reverence. When I read that the curved upturned cups of trumpet lichens receive raindrops so that the spores may be splashed out, I am amazed at the precise

adaptation. And when I read that the otherworldly lungwort lichen creeping like a flat piece of veined human tissue, has been used as a remedy for tuberculosis, replaces hops in a strong beer in Siberia and grows in rich, unpolluted and very old forests, and I am as excited about my find as if it had been an original discovery.

I learn that the turkeytail fungi seen throughout the park are the medicine cabinets of the forest. The stiff half-circles of cardboard-textured fungi pile one above the other on dead wood like a display of velvety dolls' fans. They come in shades of color from ghostly white to a lovely pale lavender and mossy green and have been used in Asia for thousands of years to enhance the immune system, act as a tonic for the kidney and liver and as anti-bacterials, -oxidants, -tumors and -virals. Sixty capsules of dried mycelium cost \$26.95.

On my last day I drive down South Boundary Road through a tunnel of trees. Snow buntings, newly arrived from the Arctic, fly ahead of my car, swooping up and down in coordinated maneuvers, staying just ahead, like a compliant herd of floating sheep. It would have been easy for them to escape by flying off into the trees. Otherwise the road is empty.

The woods road widens. I pass a motel, party store, then houses, gas stations. I enter a grocery store and reel at the busy-ness ... bright lights and colors, noise of fans, people talking. The air crackles with energy and reeks of harsh chemicals. I am re-entering my day-to-day life, exquisitely conscious of what I normally hardly notice. It's comforting to know that the Porcupine Mountains are a protected wilderness, that the small and large wonders will remain there to evoke wonder and solace whenever it's needed.

The End

