

Winter Solitude



Above: snow-covered pressure ridges of ice resemble frozen waves on the Lake Superior shoreline in the Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park, known affectionately as the Porkies.
At left: Steve Pollick on a mountain trail.

Upper Peninsula retreat provides natural inspiration for writing



The Friends of the Porkies' artist-in-residence cabin.

THE OUTDOORS PAGE

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Photographs by Steve Pollick

Wilderness forces you to unwind. You cannot get along with wild country and natural cycles unless you get into synch with them. Otherwise the stillness, the gradual unfolding of real time, will drive an over-revved You crazy.

It means turning off the noise and e-frantics of life in the 21st century. It means embracing something closer to the late 19th century, but with such useful amenities as batteries and propane included.

That is what my two-week stay as winter artist-in-residence at a wilderness cabin in Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park in western upper Michigan was all about.

No cell phones, no e-mails, no electricity, no plumbing, no fast food, no 85 mph in a 65. It is about rediscovering living as a thoughtful human being, as we were meant to be, not mindlessly frantic human *doings*, which is what we have become. We live three square meals away from anarchy. Silly.

It takes a couple of days, but gradually the tension subsides, the muscles relax, the senses turn on instead of off. You begin to really see, hear, and smell, for your eyes, ears, and nose are not assaulted by incessant noise and commotion.

Gradually, a Natural You emerges. It is cause for celebration.

Understood, we cannot all go live solo and happy in wilderness cabins. There aren't 6.7 billion such cabins on earth and not nearly enough wilderness for it, and few of us would accept such an offer

anyway. But the lessons learned can be lived anywhere, daily. They are good and true.

The experience that can be lived in the vast Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park is the solitude of winter compounded by that of wilderness.

So what if, in winter, the forests and ridges are not wild with animal activity? Better.

Many of the birds, save the hardy ravens, chickadees, and several woodpeckers, are long gone south. Many mammals are denned up, hibernating or at least hunkered down awaiting less cold and melting snows. I wondered more than once, for instance, how many black bear dens I had wandered across or near to while trekking on snowshoes.

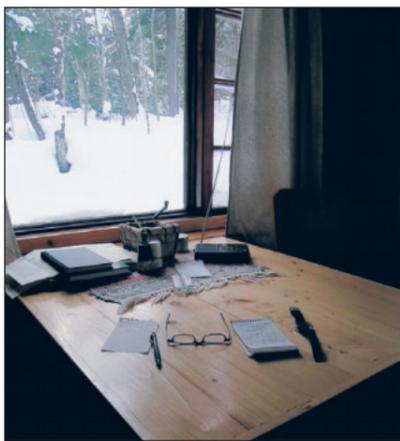
The deer congregate at night in a "yard" down by Lake Superior, somewhat protected by towering hemlocks. They range out and about for several miles by day, but always circle back to the yard by nightfall, for protection against marauding coyotes and wolves.

Daily, everywhere, you see the mincing, meandering tracks of coyotes, occasionally the prints of a wolf, a snowshoe hare, a groggy raccoon. You'll find the tracks of red squirrels between trees, weasels on the many watersheds. But mostly, the silent, empty tracks tell of creatures' passing, not their presence. At night, if you are lucky, you will hear the baleful howl of a lone wolf. Probably you will hear a barred owl, "who-who-who-whooping" in a frozen swamp forest.

So the winter wilderness is subtle. It is the ever-changing interplay of light and shadow, the daily retouching of the whitened and wind-blown landscape, the subtle things often ignored because of other distractions.

Mostly, it has to be experienced to be believed. Words fail.

Returning to the World Outside, you suffer culture shock. It does not look the same. At first glance, you do not even recognize ever having been in Toledo. Go figure.



Top left: The dining/writing table in the artist-in-residence cabin. Above center: The rising moon along the Lake Superior shoreline. Above: Sunset's afterglow along the lakeshore in the Porkies.

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To view a slide show of Steve Pollick's trip go to:

toledoblade.com