

A photograph of three brown bear cubs climbing a tree trunk. One cub is at the top, peeking over the edge. Two others are lower down, clinging to the bark with their paws. The background is a soft-focus forest with green foliage and sunlight filtering through the trees.

Notes from a Northwoods  
**NOVICE**

Renee W. Peek

*Notes from a Northwoods Novice*

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# 1

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## The Move Getting There

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. We all have seen that adage in action and know the truth of it. There is another, lesser-known, saying. “A teensy-weensy bit of knowledge can be a hoot and a half.” That is our life in a nutshell.

There are so very many people that say they want to leave the city and find some property in the woods. My husband Allen and I were dues-paying members of that group, till we finally got off the bench and put our money where our mouth was. We started our search for land or home. We *thought* we knew what we were doing, but not so much.

The Internet is a wonderful tool but can quickly cause “search overload” if you don’t know what you are doing.

How much property do you want? Do you want a house or do you want to build? Do you want a conventional septic or mound? Do you know where the power lines are? Can you put a driveway in or is there a drainage ditch? Are you on a floodplain? How deep is water for a well? Who has easements to the land? What in heaven's name is a perk test?

We spent two years figuring out what we wanted. We found a property in northern Wisconsin. It was beautiful, wooded, and surrounded by state forest. We had done our research and knew some of the financial traps in building. This property did not have a drainage ditch in front, so we would be able to build our driveway. We found out what a perk test was and it confirmed that we could build a conventional septic. The last hurdle was the electricity; how far would they have to run line? Well, as it happened, there was a power line that ran across our property. We called the company and they confirmed they would run our power right off that; we were a go!

We took that first enormous step and bought the land. We were on our way! Since I didn't plan on camping out the rest of my life, (I think Allen would have been okay with that), we would need to find an affordable way to get a house on this land. So I became educated in yet another subject area—manufactured homes. I learned the difference between mobile home, manufactured home, modular homes, and stick-built homes. We also ventured into the

world of dome homes, cinder block homes, and pole-building homes. We had some pie-in-the-sky plans, as we never anticipated the economy would tank. Our home was sold at an incredible loss, and I lost my job. Not an auspicious beginning to our new life.

We found a manufactured home that would fit our needs and nearly fit our newly-defined budget. So now where do we put the darn thing? As in so many things we have done, we knew just enough to give it a try. The land had a slight rise about a third of the way in. With GPS in hand, we walked in from the road where we thought the driveway would go, trying to find the path it would take to the house. Now this property had been logged years ago and poplars had come in incredibly thick, so walking was more than a bit of a challenge. My husband, having far more experience in the woods than I, knew how hard it would be to walk in a straight line. I, on the other hand, having little patience, tend to just do things. (Whenever we get a new appliance or tool, my husband reads the manual cover to cover, and I just plug it in and go. We both embrace the extreme.) I should mention that he also likes to demonstrate to me how wrong my approach is, so he gave me the GPS and let me go. When we stopped, he showed me how horribly off I was in my journey. Even so, I got to the place we wanted to put the house. That little rise overlooked the area that had been logged, so we could make that area our yard and



only have to clear the poplar brush out. We would still have plenty of big trees.

Apparently, if you want to clear land and prep for a home, you need a “dirt guy.” Our very wonderful realtor had a son who did that kind of work. I find it always a good thing to do business with people whose moms you know. We met with her son Lee, our very own dirt guy, at the site to show him where we wanted the driveway and yard to go. We walked and talked and pointed, and he followed behind, all the time saying okay, but he never wrote anything down, which worried us a bit. Being city folk, we were used to diagrams being faxed back and forth and signed and notarized, and down payments and pay schedules and all before any work is done. But we walked away from this meeting with a handshake and a smile. Not at all what we expected.

When we visited the property after he got the work done, our fears were alleviated. He left all the big trees and got all the brush cleared. It was better than we could have imagined. The clearing for the house placement was just what we had hoped.

Allen and I *did* need to write our plans down. Our planning for the property was done at a local restaurant called the Kozy Kitchen. Diagrams, lists, and other documents all were done on the back of the restaurant placemats. It got so that we would both walk into the restaurant, each with a pen in hand, and flip the mats over first thing. We had

some plans for paths to be cleared on the property for hiking and for the electrical supply to come up to the house. Lee joined us at that very restaurant to go over the trail system. Again, he took a look at the plans and said it would be no problem and he didn't need anything in writing. As before, he did a fantastic job. So the land was ready for a house.

*May all your perk tests be conventional.*

## **The Buildings**

If you have never seen a manufactured home placed in a basement, you should. They pick these houses up, swing them around, and drop them in place. Lee, our dirt guy, was there with his equipment. He shoved—yes, shoved—the house up the hill with his bulldozer, and moved some dirt and trees that got in the way of the crane. He had to put down a “pad” for this enormous crane that weighed tons and tons. After the crane left, he put all that gravel into the driveway. He is too cool; everybody should have a good dirt guy.



When they swing these homes into place, they do it half at a time. The first half is pretty amazing. But having the second half in the air while the first is in place, that is literally breathtaking. When they finally set them in together, there is that fraction of an inch that you need to kind of hip check into place. They do this with a mess of guys and crowbars.

There is a lot of hooking up and finishing off that happens after the house is set. Then, of course, there is the electricity. That became a mess of the first order. Now I told you that we have power lines on our property. And we paid Lee to clear an eight-foot-wide trail so they could lay the line to

the house. One of the things we found out during our property search is that if they had to follow the road to bring the power lines in, we would not be able to afford that. That is why we, both my husband and I, spoke to the power company to make sure we could have the power come through the property. We spoke to them not once, mind you, but twice, *each!* We did this even before we bought the land because it costs somewhere around five dollars a foot, and nine hundred feet as opposed to 1800 feet is a big deal.

When it came to putting the line in, all of a sudden, they wouldn't put it through the property. They had to go around. When we argued and told them what they had promised us, they asked if we had it in writing. Of course we didn't, so we were trapped. Unable to afford either solar or geothermal, we were stuck with these guys. Now they said they would throw in the trenching for free and would cap the costs, promising not to add anything additional, only if we would sign a contract to that effect. We reluctantly did as they asked. They got our soul and we got their electric. Now this was a huge kick in the head, and we ended up without money to buy a tractor, or a boat (remember we are both fishing nuts). And to top it off, after they finished, we got a letter from them saying that the cost was actually less than they estimated, but since we signed the contract, we would not get the extra cash back. Needless to say, when we drive by the electric company, we have a special "wave" just for them.

The septic and the well were going in also. None of that involved anything from us beyond a fistful of money. We did know that our nearest neighbor Mr. Nelson had wonderful tasting well water, so that was not a worry for us at all. We found out how far down his well was and gave that information to the contractor.

So water and electricity were going in, and propane guys were coming with a tank. We would be putting in a wood stove for heat, but, as I said, we are old, so we are going to need to have propane as a backup, for those times when the old bones can't haul wood anymore. By the way, when you are shopping for things for a new home, the most beautiful words in the world are *delivered* and *installed*.

Next would be getting a pole barn built. We couldn't move in till that was up as we have so much stuff. The placement of the pole barn would be closer to the road so it would not block our view of the woods. When we contacted the builder, he asked if we were sure we wanted it that far from the house as most people did not want that far of a walk. Little did we know how many miles we would put on between those two locations, but it has been worth the extra steps.

About the pole barn builder, he was a hoot! I had spoken to him on the phone; Chuck was his name. He had a gruff, construction-dude voice. We arranged to meet him at the property. I was taken aback by his appearance: he was

gorgeous, a very handsome man with an incredible smile. We talked about where to place the pole barn, what kind of doors, where the windows went, and all the technicalities of putting up such a building. When we got back in the car to leave, my husband looked at me and said, "That guy is movie-star pretty." Now Allen never, ever comments on how people look, so this guy really was handsome.

Chuck let us know that our soon-to-be neighbors were good at keeping an eye on things. They would check out the progress of the land, the house, and the pole barn. Likely, they were in our finished house before we were. The community up here is like that. They keep an eye on their own, and fortunately, they considered the two of us two of their own.

The other neighbors, the four-legged kind, were curious about things as well. Chuck said that every night, his buckets of nails and such would be dumped over. He checked for tracks to see who was doing it and found bear tracks. When he told us that, we knew that we should name our little place Bear Run.



*May all your builders be movie-star pretty.*

## **Finishing Touches**

There is just a layer of dirt or top soil here as it is mostly sand. Our neighbor says, “I can dump a five-gallon bucket of water out on the ground and jump on it and not even get my feet wet.” He is not far wrong. Water runs through it like nothing. This is amazing material. When you work in it, this silty, dusty sand seems to actually work its way into your skin.

My husband was very anxious about getting the lawn in; he said nature abhors a vacuum. If we don't plant something in this sand, Ma Nature will. So we got some grass seed at the local co-op. Do you know they have agronomists working there? You just go in and tell them where you live and they know what kind of seed you need. How cool is that? But first, we would have to prepare the area. What a hoot that was.

Our neighbors grinned at us as they said, "You are going to have to drag the area and pull roots." Allen and I looked at each other and said, "How hard can that be?" Well let me tell you, roots have a serious sense of humor. With all the trees and brush in the area, there were roots everywhere. We would take turns walking behind the mower and trailer. You see a root and you bend down and grab it. Easy enough? Well, sometimes, the roots would be loose and free and sometimes, they would still be attached a little and require a tug or two, and then sometimes, they would be firmly attached and require an ax to remove. Now the fun comes when you mistake one for the other. If you think it is loose and you grab and pull, and it's still attached, you end up face-first in the sand. If, on the other hand, you think it is attached and you pull hard and it's loose, you end up with your flip side in the sand. Either way, it is tough on the body parts. And it seems that there is no end to them. When you think you have them all, more just keep working



their way up to the surface. You finish an area, turn around, and it is covered in roots again.

The other part is dragging. We were loaned several drags from our incredibly generous neighbors. Drags are weighted pieces of metal or fencing that you pull behind a mower, tractor, or some such vehicle. The dragging takes out the ruts and bumps and piles left by the bobcats and trucks clearing the area. We started with a huge, heavy metal plate and pulled that around for several days. Now imagine, if you will, what that would do to the silty sand we have. It looked like Charlie Brown's Pigpen was running around in circles. This substance entered every orifice. I had so much sand in my mouth, I think I could have spit out mudpies. I would not allow either Allen or myself to enter the house without removing all our clothing and at least trying to get off the dirt that seemed to penetrate our every pore.

## NOTES FROM A NORTHWOODS NOVICE



I almost forgot to tell you about the problem we were having with our well. It seems that they didn't go deep enough the first time, and there was some kind of bacteria in the water. I had actually been drinking it for three days when someone came out to say it was not safe to drink. Not only was there bacteria, but there was also so much iron, you could set a glass of water on the counter and watch it turn brown in less than a minute. So when you took a bath, it was like sitting in a bowl of beef bouillon. You had to be quick to scrub off the dirt before it just blended into the rest of the murk.

The sand was ready for our grass seed, so I got out the hand-cranked seed spreader and went to work. We had the good fortune of having it drizzle the weekend we put in the seed. I cranked and cranked over the area three times to get a good layer of seed down. We had to do this right the first time as the seed was so not cheap. We were covering an area about one and a half to two acres, so it took some time. After the seed was down, we hooked up a light drag to the mower to cover the seed with sand and then we crossed our fingers and hoped.

I went out every day to look for the little green fuzz. I also got to look for wildlife tracks in the sand. We have lots of critters up here. I followed some fisher tracks out to where we planned on putting the bird feeder and found some deer tracks as well. Then I saw something so strange—I saw a footprint. I thought, *Who was out here, barefooted?* Then I realized it wasn't a bare foot, it was a *bear* foot. I followed the tracks around the house. I ended up right next to the bedroom window, with nothing but a screen between the bear, her cubs, and my husband and I. How exciting is that?

*May all your roots be loose.*

## A Dog

Our home was taking shape. The house was up and running. The pole barn was finished. The lawn was coming in.

But there was one piece missing for me and that was a dog. We lost our dog Nala while we were waiting for the house to be built, and it felt like we had forgotten something. I planned to adopt a dog from a rescue organization, so I started the incredible pile of paperwork required. I like to take in older dogs as they so often are discarded; unfortunately, they are hard to find as most are usually just put down. When I located one I was interested in, I went to meet her. She was very beautiful, but she growled at me as I petted her, usually a deal-breaker for me. The foster family vehemently denied the growl, saying she is just “vocal.” But I have had dogs all my life, and I know a growl when I hear one. Still, I really liked her and thought she would be happy lying on our porch. So I brought my niece, a real dog person, over to meet her. The dog growled at her as well, but for some reason, we both agreed to ignore that and I adopted her anyway.

Her history was that she was from a hoarder house, one of seventy dogs. When I got her home, she was afraid to go off the driveway into the grass (yes, the grass all came in). She did love to lie on the porch, but everything else seemed to frighten her. When Allen and I would go for walks in the woods, she would walk to the corner of the house and lie down. She would wait there for us until we got back.

Losing my job of twenty-one years didn't slow me down. I found another one right away. It was a fantastic job

working for a college; great people, and wonderful students. They hired me part-time to start, full-time in six months. To get there on time, I had to leave at 4:00 a.m. I had to walk the dog before I got on the road. Because of the wild-life in the area, I would check the yard carefully for any shiny eyes with a flashlight before we went out.

I rarely saw anything and Sandy, (we named her that because of how much sand she brought into the house) would never go in the grass, so I got a bit cavalier in my “perimeter checks.” One morning, I did a cursory check for eyes, and the yard looked clear. I took Sandy out to do her business before I left for work. We got to the pole barn when we both saw something move in the yard. Sandy had to pick this moment to step off the driveway for the first time. She attacked the invader. Unfortunately for all of us, it was a porcupine. She was covered in quills. I had never seen quills before; they look like spears, they are *huge!* I ran up to the house with Sandy following—she wouldn’t let me pick her up. I have to tell you it was a heart and gut-wrenching sight. She never made a sound, but she was in misery.

We got her into the house, and Allen grabbed several pairs of pliers. I held her while he started pulling. He got most of them out of her mouth, and all of them out of her chest and front leg, but she would not let us touch the ones in the pads of her feet. We all laid there on the living room floor, just trying to catch our breath and figure out what to

do. We found a number for the local vet and called. They said we could come in now, or we could wait until they open in another four hours. I was not able to wait. When we got there, the vet said he was glad he didn't put all his tools away. He also had a dog with quills at 2:00 a.m. He put Sandy under and was able to get out over one hundred more quills. We had taken out over one hundred ourselves. We asked if dogs learn their lesson from an encounter like this, and he said, "Some do, but some will go after porcupines every time they see them." I knew Sandy was a smart one, and she would never do this again.

A few days later, I was taking her for her last walk before bed and the coyotes started howling. It can be an eerie sound that quickens the heart. I had Sandy on a leash this time to avoid any problems, but I created a new one. She was so frightened by the sound; all she wanted to do was get back up on the porch. She was dragging me along, but I just wasn't going fast enough for her, so she turned around, slipped her collar, and ran to the porch. She probably thought it was a whole herd of howling porcupines ready to attack.

Sandy may have been afraid of wildlife, but she was my fierce protector. I was very happy about that as I spent a great deal of time alone. She would be a wonderful companion for me and Bear Run would be a great home for her.

*May all your porcupines be far away.*

### 3

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## First Winter Easy Start

Our general area of Wisconsin is considered a channel for arctic air, bringing with it wonderfully clean air and clean waters. The specific area in which our home lies is a natural wildlife corridor, with fisher, marten, mink, fox, wolf, deer, porcupine, and bear, all regular visitors at Bear Run.

The benefits of arctic air are many, but the one drawback is the frigid winter temperatures. A thermometer reading of forty below is not unusual; in fact, it is the norm. Thinking you can be prepared for these extreme temps is absurd. I can remember wind chills of sixty below when I was young. When I say, “I can remember,” that means I recall seeing it on the news; I don’t remember what it felt like. I guess that is the way we protect ourselves. Pain exists only in the

moment; you cannot recall the experience. Thank heavens for that, or Allen and I would never get the snowblower on every year.

I have never been a fan of winter. For most of my life, my toes were always cold. They froze up at first frost, and they didn't thaw until spring. I tried all the different winter footwear. If I found a boot that was warm enough, it weighed so much that I couldn't walk in it for long. Then, finally, I found Steger Mukluks, and it felt like walking outside in slippers. When you put them on, they are so lightweight, you are compelled to do what I have come to call the mukluk dance.

I got my mukluks in June, so my first dance was in the warm summer sun. When I wore them in snow for the first time, I was very doubtful anything that lightweight would ever be able to keep me warm. We took a long hike around Gooseberry Falls in Duluth. Allen was incredibly patient with me as I kept saying, "I can't believe how warm my feet are." He would just look at me and smile; the mukluks were his idea.

The entire weekend in Duluth was eye-opening for me. Knowing my feet would be warm, I wanted to hike all over. We got ourselves off trail in snow that was hip deep, and I had the time of my life. Winter didn't scare me anymore. I still thought of it as the indoor season, but I would no longer dread its coming.



Our first winter here had a slow start. December brought with it little snow and fairly warm temps. We got a bit complacent; thankfully, Mother Nature is always willing to slap you upside the head and knock you back into the real world. We had a wonderfully huge snowfall, making it a true winter wonderland. Then just to add a bit of challenge, the snow was followed by a day of rain.

Since our community is timely at getting roads plowed, Sandy and I could get out for walks without struggling. Allen and I don snowshoes and pound down trails around the property and down to the river. That way, Sandy and I have great trails to walk, and I can get around the property easily. Sandy loves the winter, and the cold never diminishes her desire to be outside. I seem to always have dogs that are undaunted by weather, be it pouring rain, frigid temps, or heat indexes high enough to cook an egg.

Daily, Sandy and I would walk the road down to the river. Because of the heavy snow and rain, the plow threw back big snow chunks. They seemed to call to someone to stack them, and I was just the one to do it. I started near the house; it was kind of fun having an army of snow cairns guarding the road. Then, being a mildly obsessive person, I couldn't walk down the road without seeing more chunks that needed stacking. It took a couple of days, but I lined the road with over a hundred of them. Sandy would find a place in the sun and lie down while I worked.

I enjoyed my structures and continued to add to them daily, making some stacks pretty high. One day, while refining my work, I met some neighbors on the road. They asked if I was the one making the statues. I felt kind of foolish, but I confessed it was me. When you spend a lot of your time alone, you don't look at yourself through others' eyes, and that can be relatively freeing.

*May you all experience the mukluk dance.*

## **Winter Fun**

A whole new world opened up for me on our first Bear Run winter. The storms and cold of this season can actually be fun! We had tiny snowfalls almost daily. I started finding critter tracks when Sandy and I would head out on our walks. There were always fox and deer tracks in the driveway and on the road. Grouse and turkey tracks make me laugh. You can see their heads jut forward as they hesitate with their feet. It is amazing how footprints left in the snow tell a story and create a picture of the animal in your mind.

I actually got pretty good at identifying not only the kind of animal but individuals as well. Allen is an amazing tracker, and he was more than willing to share some of his knowledge with me. Bucks have different tracks than does, who knew? He said one of the best ways to learn tracking

is to watch the animals, see what they are doing, and then go out and look at the tracks. That is how I learned to recognize a couple of the deer that were regular visitors. One of them was a tiny little buck I called Fifty Cent because he was a half a buck.

One morning, I was out following some fisher or marten tracks, and I found people tracks. I started following them and scared the bejesus out of myself because I followed the tracks right up to the pole barn door. I finally realized it was me wearing different shoes. I took some time to learn the pattern of all the footwear of both Allen and myself; I also recognize the boot prints of one of our neighbors, and his lady friend who walk in the area. I would like to say that I know it is a woman by the size of the boot, the length of the stride, and how the foot falls, but that wouldn't be true. I saw her walking with him. Now take into account that this is winter in Wisconsin and I was still able to identify this person as a female through all the layers of fleece and down. It's no easy task.

Life and death struggles can be found in tracks in the snow. Tiny little mouse tracks hopping across the top of the snow seem to be happy and joyful. Then you find one of these tracks just disappear into nowhere. If you look closely, you can see where the hawk's wing tips left their marks in the snow as it flew away with the mouse. Sometimes, you can follow a little critter to a tunnel or hole in the snow.

If you look closely, the hole is ringed with beautiful frost designs from their breath. It has to be pretty cold before that happens.

The cold did finally find us, and rather than hide from it, we embraced it. We had a ton of fun throwing boiling water off the porch and listening to it snap and crackle and fall to the ground as snow. We do find entertaining ways to spend our time.

The trees snap and crack when the cold hits with such intensity. When the ambient temperature drops to thirty below, the trees sound like they are exploding. And the snow itself becomes noisy in the almost violent cold. Anyone who has walked in the snow on a cold day knows the truth of that; the squeak of your boots in the snow can be almost deafening. I was getting good at reading the temperature by the volume of the squeak.

With my mukluks, the cold no longer kept me from hiking, but the deep snow meant using snowshoes. When we were in Alaska, the guide there likened snowshoes to attaching cement blocks to your feet. Allen and I feel differently; we think they give you freedom to get around no matter how deep the snow. We can just walk out our back door, and we are off to the river. Of course my “always prepared” Boy Scout Allen carries a pack with everything we need to set up house in the woods, and I throw a fire-starting kit in my pocket and off we go.

I love starting fires with flint and steel; it makes it more of a challenge. Allen is a master fire builder with a technique that is flawless. His fires are purpose driven, the size of the fire and the varieties of woods he chooses are directed by how the fire will be used. He has been building fires since he was a kid; first, camping with his family, then with the Boy Scouts, and a week alone in the Boundary Waters Canoe area in January. He has perfected how to build and start fires to cook, to “mug up,” and just for fun. I have far less experience, but I still love to build a good fire.

If we are in a serious situation, Allen is on fire duty because he knows the “right way” to build a fire. I, however, get to build them the rest of the time, and as you might guess, I don’t do it the right way. I prefer to do it the flip-flop-and-shorts way, which means I do it differently every time. Even though Allen lets me make the fires, he is still unable to restrain himself from passive-aggressively telling me I am doing it wrong. I, of course, am unable to restrain myself from active-aggressively telling him to bite me. Fortunately, we do this dance often enough that we have become good at not becoming emotionally attached to our words. We maintain our individual insanity and still have fun.

It was a typical cold day. We went out for an afternoon of snowshoeing. Again, Allen is better at all of this than I am, plus, I have yet to know how to dress for these activities. For starters, my time of life brings with it hot flashes, and

they always seem to occur whenever I am getting dressed in warm clothing. It is hard to put on more layers when you are boiling from the inside. The other issue is that when I have snowshoes on, I find it hard to go slowly. I would rather run in them, which inevitably leads to overheating.

The temperature when we headed out was ten below, but since I started out at a run, I was comfortable in my light clothing. The plan was for me to get a fire going at our halfway point by the river so we could “mug up” with a cup of tea and then continue our journey. By the time we reached the halfway point, I was drenched in sweat and the situation turned from fun to a serious situation, and Allen and I switched roles fluidly, he got the fire built the “right way.” I got the area ready and the water and tea prepared. I was able to get my clothes dry and warm by the fire so we could continue our adventure. Allen is my lifesaver.

*May your tracks never stop in the middle of nowhere.*

## **Anniversary**

We were excited about our wedding anniversary in our new home. It falls in December, so one would think that a day on the beach would be out of the question. Well not for Allen and me. We celebrate by heading to Lake Superior.

When I was young, my family vacations were often spent on the north shore of the Great Lake. As a kid, I

never appreciated the beauty of the lake and the wildlife. My most cherished memories were of sharing a hotel room with the other six members of my family and eating cereal right out of those little individual serving boxes. I mean, how cool is pouring milk right into the cardboard box and eating the cereal with a plastic spoon. For a kid, that is vacation fun! My adult visits have been a bit different.

The temperature on our anniversary was twelve below, so we would have to be well dressed for our stroll on the beach. We got to Minnesota Point and put on all the extra clothes we brought, and I did the mukluk dance. There was a biting wind coming off the lake, with big waves breaking on the ice mounds on shore. It was an awesome sight. I really enjoy climbing on rocks and there were some huge ones along the shore that were covered in ice. A bit of crawling was needed to get out to the edge of the water and climb on to a big rock. It was an amazing feeling, sitting on this rock, surrounded by the water of Lake Superior in below zero weather. As much as I enjoyed this experience, I did, however, feel safer when I crawled my way back to dry land. The windchill had to be near thirty below, but we were dressed for it, so we found a good place to just sit and watch the lake and listen to the waves. We decided to head back to the car when we lost all feeling in our sit downs.

Allen loves taking pictures and Duluth is incredibly photogenic. We headed out to the lift bridge in the down-

town area so Allen could use up some film. I have learned that I need to be able to entertain myself whenever his camera comes out of the case, so I walked on the pier and across the bridge, and I found more big rocks to climb on. Allen took photos until his fingers wouldn't move any more, and then we were off to find a place for lunch and a warm-up.

Down the shore a bit was a very well-known restaurant with an expansive view of the lake. When we went in, we realized that we were a bit out of place attire-wise. Fortunately, the other table of customers left, so we were alone, making it much easier to fit in. I have to admit, we had not been to a restaurant outside of our little town for quite some time, so perhaps our shock at the menu was to be understood. Both Allen and I have chafed in restaurants for many years, so we know food very well, making it all the more disappointing when we come across menus that seem to be created for the sole purpose of being snobbish.

On a side note, I should tell you how we met. I was teaching restaurant cookery at a vocational school, and Allen was a part-time sub; I was his boss. What a great way to start a relationship with your future husband.

Anyway, the more we have cooked in restaurants, the simpler and fresher we like our food, and we appreciate good, fresh local ingredients. We don't need to have our taste buds challenged or shocked, and more than anything, we don't need to spend the week's food money on one meal.



All that being said, we still ordered our lunch since the view was worth whatever the cost. We did, however, promise ourselves a true anniversary dinner back home at the Kozy Kitchen.

We headed back, energized by the Great Lake, and ready to face another year together.

*May you never lose feeling in your sit down.*

## 5

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# Bears

## The Seed Feeder

In all the places we have lived, both Allen and I have always had bird feeders. But with the bears of the Northwoods, feeders can mean trouble. Bears are strong, determined, and very, very big! They are able to climb not only up trees and poles, but they can go hand over hand across to a feeder that is suspended on a cable or rope. If we were going to put up a feeder, it had to be bear proof. So I designed what I hoped would do the trick.

With Allen's help, I strung a cable up between two trees, about twenty feet off the ground—and that is where Allen's skills came into play. He is very good about getting ropes and cables high in trees without the use of a ladder. I have often thought I should videotape the process, since there is a great deal of running and ducking for cover. You see, he

ties a metal rock hammer on the end of a rope and throws it up into the tree, trying to get it over a branch. When it works, it is a beautiful thing. When it doesn't, it can be either painful or intensely funny.

If you are standing on the rope or you hit the tree with the hammer, it tends to come back directly at you. If you have never been in this situation, I can tell you that there is a definite surge of adrenalin running through your veins. That starts the fight or flight response, and, as you might imagine, a fight with a whirling hammer of death holds little hope of survival, so flight it is. There would be a modest amount of joy watching a young, fit person jump out of the way, but put an aging and stout individual in the same situation, and there will be laughter. Allen, as in all these kind of things, is much better at it than I, but I still like to take my turn.

Allen positions himself and the rope, then repositions himself and the rope, then repositions himself again, before he throws the hammer. I, on the other hand, grab and toss. I have far more "returns" than Allen, but knowing that, I just run away every time I throw. He was successful right away on the first tree, of course, the second tree did us both in, but I finally got it to drop.

Knowing that bears can climb out on cables and still get to the feeder, I put lengths of PVC pipe on the cable. That way, the pipe will spin and, in theory, the bear will drop off

before getting to the feeders. I showed the design to Rolly, who just looked at it and said, “Un-huh.” I asked for his thoughts, and he said, “I give it two years before they figure it out. They are professionals, you know.”

I knew we were safe while the bears were hibernating, so spring would be the first test. The feeder was very active with bird life all winter, and spring just brought loads of new faces. We even saw several foxes, eating the corn we had put out for the deer. Turkeys, blue jays, and squirrels would finish off whatever the deer left behind. There was not a bit of feed that went to waste.

I figured if I wanted to see any bears, they would be by the feeder at night, so I shone a flashlight out the window every half hour or so after dark, hoping to spot some activity. One night, I did.

*May the hammer of death never come back your way.*

## **First Meeting**

One evening, I shone the flashlight under the feeder one last time before I went to bed, and there were bears! I saw a small bear run up a tree as a larger bear stood up at the base of the same tree. I was sure it was a momma and a cub. I found out over the next few days that I was wrong about the relationship between the two. The smaller bear was no cub; he was just small, so I named him Little Bit. The other

was not his mother; it was another bear chasing him. Little Bit became a regular visitor along with several other, much larger bears.

My desire to see a bear had been fulfilled, but I still wondered how I would react if I saw one face to face. When you look at a bear through a window from the safety of your home, they have a Disneyesque quality, cute and cuddly. But when you meet one out in the real world, their claws and teeth and overall beariness have the potential to be a bit more threatening, certainly not the kind of encounter for which I hoped.

The next morning, I took Sandy down the road for her walk. On the way back to the house, I found some bear tracks by the pole barn. Because of the dry spring, all the critters in the area, bears included, were looking for any source of water. I kept Sandy's water dish by the pole barn door, with some extra jugs to refill it. The tracks were near her overturned dish and smashed jugs, and the tracks were huge.

I grabbed my camera and took some pictures of the tracks by the water dish, and decided to compare the size to Little Bit's prints at the feeder. I was bent over, concentrating and focused on the ground, when I heard a "voice." I looked up and there he was, Little Bit, who was standing on his hind legs about ten to fifteen yards away. He was much bigger than I remembered, taller than I am for sure.

I knew I shouldn't run or move, not my feet at least. In my head, I was moving faster than the speed of light. I knew exactly what to do—back away slowly, and firmly say, “Go away, bear.” He apparently didn't know the rules and continued to saunter toward me. As I maintained my slow retreat, I hoped Sandy would stay asleep on the porch, since she could really make this a bad situation. I finally realized I had a camera in my hand and as I brought it up to take a picture, Little Bit stood up again and posed for me. Deciding I was no threat, he went back to work scraping up seeds by the feeder, and I made it back into the safety of the house, armed with the determination to be more observant while I am outside.

Spring always carries with it a great deal of yard work, and I was carrying out my plan to add more perennials around the house. Landscaping is not cheap, but a few plants every year would not break the bank. Eventually, I wanted all perennials, so when we are old and decrepit, the garden will be self-sustaining.

I wanted to prepare a new area for plants, and with trowel in hand, I headed out to work. I checked the area for bears and all was clear. As I worked my first bit of soil, I heard huffing behind me. There was Little Bit, pacing back and forth and making his warning huffing noise. As I turned, all I said was, “I have work to do, this is my house, and you are going to have to leave.” He had other plans, and he started making

what are called false charges. Knowing they were false was not as comforting as you might think, so I packed up my gear and retreated. Teeth and claws always trump chores.

*May all your bears be Disneyesque.*

## **Little Bit and Crew**

The deer come every evening to clean up the seeds under the feeder. We usually have a few at a time or, on special occasions, a dozen or more. As the new growth in the woods generates more food, fewer deer visit the feeder, leaving room for the bevy of bears that have become “regulars.” Little Bit, of course, heads for the trees even when large birds fly over, so that’s where he spends most evenings.

The rest of the ensemble: Stretch, he is a big bruiser. He got his name because when he lies on the ground to eat, he stretches his back legs straight out behind him. Then there is Patch, who appears younger and leaner. He is so named because of a brown patch on his chest. His partner in crime is Brown Nose, who is nearly the same size and build as Patch. Perhaps a relative. There are also the family groups: Momma with one cub, Momma with two cubs, and Momma with three cubs.

They each have their own personalities and behaviors; I get to see them from the safety of my living room, so I can take it all in without worrying about life and limb. They are

a bit territorial, and each individual likes to have the area to themselves, so they try to drive the others away. The mommas and their cubs are never around when the big males come, preferring the daytime hours to browse the leftovers.

One night, I saw some deer leap and bound, almost fly away from the feeder. Stretch strolled into the yard and took his place, feet stretched out behind him in the pile of seeds. Suddenly, he got up and ran to the tree as though to climb it, but then just stood there. Patch cautiously circled the yard, but Stretch charged and ran him off. Before Stretch could get back in position, Patch made his charge and he had the seeds. They challenged and charged each other back and forth for about thirty minutes. Finally, Stretch won the area. No matter what Patch did, he could not be moved. Patch laid in the yard nearby, waiting for his turn to eat. It appeared that Stretch does not allow any queuing up, and he gave one final powerful run with Patch giving up, at least for that night.

The next night, Little Bit was in the area, but Stretch rushed him, and Little Bit was scared off and relegated to spending the night viewing the show from his tree. Stretch was again put on the defensive when Patch showed up, and this time, he was not alone. Brown Nose was with him for backup, a little bear gang. Stretch doesn't even try to run them off, but gives in, and the two victors enjoy their spoils, while Little Bit looks on from his tree.



Seemingly for the first time, a bear noticed and tried to retrieve the actual feeder hanging from the cable. Patch looked up and stood on his hind legs, looking longingly at the suet and sunflower seeds. He reached up with one of his huge front paws and then the other. Finally, he stood reaching with both paws and, I know it's not possible, but he seemed to be trying to stand on his tippy-toes. He was just a few inches from reaching his goal. I was sad for him but happy for me since he would have destroyed all the feeders if he had been able to reach them.

There are a couple of additional bears; these are the odd ones, or what we consider to be the troublemakers. A whole different breed, and I mean that literally. The "regular bears" all have the body style you expect to see in a black bear: short legs, wide powerful back and chest, a broad head, and a short nose. The troublemakers have a completely different build. They are long-legged, with narrow backs and chests, thin faces, and long noses. I have named our two delinquent bears Cletus and Clete.

Cletus is the larger of the two, but neither of them has any fear of people, and both are vicious with the other bears. Poor Little Bit never puts up a fight when another bear comes near, but just escapes to the safety of his tree. This is acceptable to the regular bears, but it isn't enough for Cletus, who goes right up after him, appearing to be very intent on killing poor Little Bit. We intervene when

we can, and Cletus will back down the tree if we holler and throw things at him. I think it is just because we distract him and not because he is afraid of us, since he seems to have no fear at all of humans. He will walk right up to the house as though he belonged there while the rest of the bears give all the buildings a wide berth.

The mommas are protective and don't like to have their cubs near any other bears. They like to be out during the day, which gives us a terrific view of them and provides wonderful photo opportunities. But it makes it difficult to get my chores done. I know enough to surrender the area and head to the house when a momma bear enters the picture with her cubs. The problem is, how do I get them to leave so I can get back to work? If you try to scare them off, the babies go up a tree, and Momma won't leave until she deems the area safe and secure, which could take an hour or more.

I needed to develop a working relationship with the mommas. It took a few tries, but we finally came to an understanding. When I needed to go outside, I opened a window and started talking to them. As you might imagine, it didn't matter what you said, but how you said it, so I spoke very gently and asked them politely to leave. The cubs looked up at me and then at their momma. If I didn't frighten her, she didn't send them up a tree. But with continued conversation, she would just turn and start to walk

away. When she reached the edge of the woods, she always broke into a run. The fun in this process was that often the cubs weren't paying attention, typical of a lot of children, and it took awhile for them to realize their momma was gone. But she, being tolerant and patient, knows her cubs' behaviors and always waits for them to catch up.



The cubs spend a couple of years under their moms' influence, learning all of the things they need to know to survive. Cubs are usually not sent on their way until they get to their teenage years, but I think something must have

happened to Little Bit's mom because he didn't seem to have all the info he needed. Little Bit acted more like he was still in the middle school time of his life, demonstrating his dominance in our yard. He would run at the young trees I planted, jump on them, and pin them to the ground. If they would not yield, or bounce back up, he would pounce on them again. To really show his power, he would attack our hoses, and for some reason, always chose to commit the assault in the middle of the hundred-foot-long hoses. I now am very adept at patching hoses.

*May everything be within reach on your tippy-toes.*