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Land Snorkeling with Clyde Aspevig

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GO OUTSIDE. WALK SLOWLY. PAY ATTENTION. Listen. Smell the air. Taste it. Look at the soil and see how it responds to your step. Notice which grasses shine brightest in the morning dew. Compare birds, the differences in wing and shape and flight pattern. Maybe kick over a rock, see what's under there.

This is land snorkeling. Doing it could take you almost anywhere, even if you never leave your own neighborhood.

Think of it like snorkeling a reef. You drift over mysterious turf. You keep your head down, mostly. Everything is cool, so you look it all over, and you wonder. You come back smiling.

Land snorkeling isn't power walking, or even hiking. It isn't about exercising your body. Rather, it's a conscious method of exercising your curiosity.



ASPEN INTERIOR

It's not so much about finding answers as it is about finding questions.

It's a vital tool for Clyde Aspevig, one of America's preeminent landscape painters. He's been land snorkeling most of his life but only recently came up with a name for it.

Now 58, he grew up on a hardscrabble farm in Rudyard, out in the vast wheatfields of northern Montana.

Aspevig put in a lot of time on a tractor there, particularly after his father died of stomach cancer at the age of 36.

"I grew up on a tractor," he told me. "That's where I started looking at landscape, because that's all there was to look at."

Like most teenagers driving around in circles, baking in the heat, choking in the dust, he could usually find a reason to climb off that loud contraption.

And when he parked the machine, it was usually near the

coulees too steep for the tractor to carve.

"My favorite thing was getting off the tractor and going down into the coulees where it wasn't a monoculture. It was just so much more interesting. And that's where I got the attachment to looking closer at things."

And he paid attention, which is what land snorkeling is all about. He noticed that shadows, like plants, change colors as the seasons progress. They tend to be blue in the spring but turn purple in the fall.

He noted how colors change depending on where you stand, the "blueing and graying of things as they recede into the distance."

Later, as an adult, he learned that Leonardo da Vinci had spelled out the same phenomenon, and that gave Aspevig a moment of deep satisfaction: A farm kid from Rudyard had

figured out something discovered centuries earlier by one of the world's greatest painters.

"The act of discovery is one of the most gratifying sensations," he told me, standing on the bank of the Shields River, near his home in the shadow of the Crazy Mountains.

So I decided to test that.

HOME TURF

It's a sunny morning early in July, with the weatherman calling for 90 degrees later. And I know I'll feel a lot more heat than that if I let my wife's patio flowers go dry. So I water them. But I move slowly. I pay attention. One flowerpot has sprouted some bright-red blossoms I hadn't noticed before.

I count seven distinct hues in a poppy flower. The grass and shrubbery, the tomatoes and zucchini offer myriad shades of verdancy. The pepper plants are especially bright, but all of this pales when compared to the iridescent greens of the tiny fly I brush from my neck and examine on my thumb. I don't recall ever seeing one quite like it.



CRANE LAKE

A bright yellow butterfly flits overhead.

All of this is part of my routine on a typical summer morning. But this morning, instead of just watering the plants and swatting a bug, I'm land snorkeling. And colors are filling my palette before I even leave the yard.

Then I cross the street to an empty lot. Disturbed ground, it's nothing like wilderness, but it will do for this test.

The grass is knee high, and the dew dribbles down, but at a different pace on different plants. Gravity applies evenly, but resistance varies. Somehow, the more slender grasses clutch the water more tightly, illustrating their tensile strength.

Milkweed grows in this ground. Usually I pull this invader, but on this morning I try to count the strands of pollen tangled in the sun-yellow blossom. My cat, Norman, joins me, creeping through the grass. Then she climbs a sunny rock and licks the beads of moisture from her fur, which makes me wonder about the tensile strength of cat hair.

A ditch adjoins the property, and I notice it is losing its gray tint and turning green as the summer strengthens. I wonder how dissolved mud changes the way water reflects sunlight.



PRAIRIE AWAKENING



YELLOWSTONE FALLS

A patch of cattails endures in this man-carved waterway, offering mid-town refuge to mallards and red-winged blackbirds. I wonder where they've gone. I give Norman the eyeball. She is named for a favorite uncle and, like him, she's a hunter. She rolls over and feigns innocence.

I step from the shade of a willow tree and note how the sun nourishes thistle and cheatgrass, helping them crowd out the natives. The cheatgrass is purple, on its way to tawny.

I stop to snorkel a deciduous tree I have passed a thousand times and realize I have never noticed the pale green lichens on its crusty bark, the array of colors splayed on the cloven trunk. I see now that this ancient tree, if left alone, will return to the soil in a process that moves at the speed of a lichen's appetite.

Inside the neighbor's fence, the lawn is tended. Under the swingset, I see ruts carved by the feet of happy children. This

tells me that everything has a place.

These are things I see, new questions to ponder, and I'm less than 100 yards from my own door.

I return home grinning and pour a bowl of cereal, which reminds me of the wheatfields of Aspevig's youth.

SILENT MUSIC

"That's the essential part," Aspevig had said. "To see how intertwined everything is."

In this 21st century world, dominated by disincentives to pay attention — a GPS to find our car in parking lots, cell phones that remember all our numbers — a concept like land snorkeling helps connect us to our roots, the landscapes that shaped our evolution.

"It's nothing new," Aspevig said. "We've been doing it forever."

Early humans paid attention to nature because if they didn't, they died. Either something ate them or they starved. They knew they were part of nature.

But as humans evolved, they lost that connection, or at least an awareness of it. They built more fences, divorcing nature from the self.

Aspevig, an intellectual but not an academic, reads widely in ecology and philosophy, music theory and brain chemistry and anthropology. And he puts some of all this into his remarkable landscapes, stunning works filled with subtle complexities, abstractions combined to create a representational likeness, something bigger than a photograph. He doesn't paint every leaf and stem. Rather, he suggests them in such a way to make them look as though they live in the canvas.

He explains his work in musical terms. A piece entitled "Intimate Encounters" shows a stand of aspens. Some trees are whole notes. Others are half notes, sixteenth notes. There



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Clyde Aspevig at his home near Clyde Park.

is timbre here, harmony and volume.

Some colors stand out.

"On a piano, you're going to hit that note a little harder," he explained. "It's a visual form of what I call silent music."

The process has been incredibly successful for him, bringing money and many awards. His paintings adorn public and private collections around the nation. They fetch tens of thousands of dollars apiece, and the Fine Art Dealers Association says he "is considered by many to be the foremost representational landscape artist of our times."

But this success is made possible by what he calls land snorkeling, the quiet examination of nature's details, a practice he started in the wheatfields around Rudyard.

An example: Understanding the tensile strength of grass, how it reacts to wind and water and light, allows you to paint a better landscape, to let your work sing a true song.



INTIMATE ENCOUNTERS

Studying nature's details gave him a foundation for his success. Now, he's using that success to take land snorkeling to its logical next step: active conservation. As a board member of the American Prairie Foundation, he's working hard to preserve millions of acres of native prairie in northeastern Montana.

"Appreciating landscape translates into being actively involved in landscape and trying to preserve what's left," he said.

Plus, land snorkeling is fun. Aspevig would like to see more people doing it, whatever their occupation.

You can make it as simple or as complex as you like. You can use it to better understand the plants in your yard. Or to catch more fish. To be a better hunter or parent or citizen.

Land snorkeling is about teaching yourself to slow down and be curious in a world that encourages you to hurry up and let the machines handle things. It's about examining nature's works on nature's terms.

And that's an increasingly rare concept. Aspevig would like to see that change.

"Ask yourself," he said. "If you were in college and



DEAN LAKE

there was a class called Land Snorkeling 101, wouldn't you want to take it?"

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