

# Rewards of a little cabin in the woods

A neglected cabin on Jackson Lake in the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest became a respite in all seasons.

EVERY SEASON HAS A STORY.

*Story and photos by Charles Mortensen*

It all started with an old black-and-white photograph — a proud 12-year-old holding a 13-pound northern pike — and son saying to the pictured fisherman, “Dad, let’s go fishing in the area where you caught that big fish.”

The big fish eluded us, yet we caught something more valuable — the chance to rebuild a cabin. It had been empty and neglected for three years on the east shore of Jackson Lake, within the boundaries of the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest. It was connected to Namekagon Lake through a winding scenic channel bordered by pickerelweed, arrowhead, water lily, tamarack and a beaver lodge.

Let the rewards begin.



The spring air is fresh with the scent of large-flowered trillium.

## Spring – the air

After the long icy grip of winter gives way to greenup with aspen and birch

leaves in fluorescent yellow-green, one notices the air — how fresh it feels, smells and even tastes — sweet, of the earth, warm. It is bracing, yet not cold. It feels light, not heavy and soon it will hold the music of returning birds. Before long it will be time to put in the dock, replete with memories of grandchildren running to pier’s end and into the water with joy and laughter. Those memories are second only to those of bluegills, bass and northern pike they reeled in from the same spot. The air has a scented freshness born on the boughs of balsam and colored by the pure white blossoms of juneberry and large-flowered trillium.

The color of nature is even more apparent. Among the canopy tree branches, many species of migrating warblers flash their iridescent blue, green, orange and yellow while looking ever so closely for insects feeding on emerging leaves. It is as Henry David Thoreau described in “Autumnal Tints,” “Visible for miles, too fair to be believed.”

There is also the psychological effect spring brings — the light, quick step and the thought of new growth to come. Ephemeral flowers (sessile bellwort,

trout lily and starflower) come and go with summer flora yet to appear. Most of the small 7-ounce warblers will pass, but some stay to nest for now the leaves are full, bringing more insects for food. Shortly, “hummers” (ruby-throated hummingbirds) will streak from branch to flower, insect to insect and many feeders throughout the northland.

One year the ice yielded the unexpected when a bald eagle landed on an ice floe. It was May 1, a bright and sunny day. It appeared that the eagle, while scanning the lake surface for fish, might also be basking in the sun for the same reason northerners do — spring warmth.

## Going to the mailbox

Initially thought of as a chore, the half-mile walk on a gravel road has turned into an inspiring respite and learning opportunity through the seasons. It starts with an overarching, mostly sugar maple canopy, lined with raspberry shrubs in places and gives way to an opening created for a landing strip long ago. One can see forget-me-not and wild columbine in spring, black-eyed Susan and orange hawkweed in summer, followed by New England aster and goldenrod in fall.

Spring also brings the sweet resinous fragrance of the Balm of Gilead tree, better known as popple. Supporting the admonition that the only constant in nature is change, an advancing colony of aspen grows larger each year, closing the

The warmth of spring sees the passage of warblers — like this male golden-winged — but some will stay to nest.



opening of the 1930s landing strip. Bluebirds and tree swallows populate several nest boxes and the voices of spring peepers resonate in a wet vernal depression at road's end.

Returning, talk is of mail received (or not), and a look downward yields interesting pieces of geological history in the gravel at our feet. The massive Wisconsin glacier of 10,000 years past brought rocks containing jasper, quartz, sandstone, agate, granite, greenstone, basalt and more.

Each walk is different, for one never walks the same road twice. One particular spring day points to the truth of that axiom. Nearing our driveway, we glanced to our right. There not less than 10 feet away in a small group of saplings, in all its brilliant red-and-black glory, was a male scarlet tanager. It moved ever so slightly, looking for insects and seemingly oblivious to our appreciative eyes. It soon flew to more distant cover — one viewing per customer!

### Summer – the pipsisewa and a chick

It seems like most northern retreats have a name and we decided to join that fraternity. It came about as we were exploring the steep 70-degree incline to the lake. I noticed a small plant with shiny dark green leaves and a delicate, pinkish flower. Memory of a similar plant from a forest hike long ago recalled the name pipsisewa. After looking it up I had confirmation, and our 3 acres became Pipsisewa Shore and a special summer



October throws flaming colors from maple, birch and oak.

week for our grandchildren would become Camp Pipsisewa.

The plant derives its scientific genus name, *Chimaphila*, from the Greek words for winter and love. Apparently the name relates to an ability to stay green throughout the winter. One of our few herbaceous evergreen plants, it is small in height (3 to 10 inches) with leaves arranged in a whorl and is best seen when one is on hands and knees.

Like many others, we also have the good fortune to live on a lake with nesting loons and have enjoyed learning their four distinct calls. Pairs are not always successful in raising chicks, owing to predation and heavy storms washing away shallow lake-edge nests. With high hopes we joined a group trip in an excursion on our lake, hoping to see a pair with chicks in the open water. Pure joy emanated from the nine assembled at pontoon's edge — a pair with a chick! We were transfixed as the parents dove to capture fish and feed the just fledged nestling — a reward indeed.

### Fall into winter

The warm languid days of summer give way to raking leaves and chips left from the wood splitter, thinking of the warm fireplace to come. A lifetime brings just so many summers when living is truly a little easier, especially in the north. So let the summer dawdle into fall with its warm breezes, dancing butterflies, streaking dragonflies and moonlit water.

Now, October throws flaming colors from maple, birch and oak and the bright sparkling points of light on rippling waves seem to be more intense. November brings the early snows of winter, usually soft and gentle, capping the verdant

green of hemlock, balsam, spruce and pine.

For many the balsam fir's highest appeal and value may well be related to aesthetics. Though it has solid importance as a Christmas tree, it also provides pulpwood for paper and cover for snowshoe hare and ruffed grouse. Few will not be thrilled by the beauty of fresh snow gracing dark green branches glistening in sunlight, or in the silhouetted whiteness of a full moon. If fresh snow is one of the elixirs of life, the sight of the forest edge replete with snow-capped balsam fulfills that need many times over. Interestingly, the older trees develop the perfect spire, like a church steeple. Both, when viewed against an azure sky are beacons of grace, elegance and form.

Now, it is time to go in and do those things that were abandoned to the busy outside activities of summer. The fire-side beckons, its warmth enhancing conversation, reading, knitting and listening to music — simple joys, but well remembered. Soon, the 40-item checklist for closing the cabin will be completed, the harsh winds and bitter temperatures will come as they have for millenniums and longer. Then that sweet smell of spring will once again arrive and a million more small joys and rewards will follow, like those calls of the loons who never fail to return. ❧

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