



**LIMBERLOST TALES:
A SUMMER WITH UNCLE JOE**

Compiled and Edited By:
Gareth Cockwell

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*This book is dedicated to our Grandmother Daphne,
for encouraging us at an early age to record our
experiences in the Canadian wilderness, and for
sharing with us each year the many forms of life,
which flow from the great oceans
that meet in front of her seaside home.*

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Foreword

This is the second in a series of four nature books set in the Limberlost Forest, which lies next to the world famous Algonquin Provincial Park.

The first book was written to interest children between their sixth to tenth years, the second for those who are ten to fifteen years of age, and the third for individuals with a deeper interest in the wonder of nature.

The fourth book is an historical novel, as it steps back 150-years in time to record the arrival of immigrants from Europe to settle the lands, which today comprise the Limberlost Forest & Wildlife Reserve.

This book traces the experiences of three youths – Teda, Colmac and Thegar – and the lessons they learnt about the wonders of the wilderness from an experienced woodsman while they were growing up in a northern forest with pristine lakes and an abundance of wildlife.

Foreword

They came to know their tutor affectionately as Uncle Joe; building an endearing friendship and a deep commitment to share their knowledge with others with similar interests in the northern wilderness.

Each chapter chronicles a journey to a different area of the reserve to study nature under Uncle Joe's patient tutelage. Along the way they learn many valuable lessons which help to shape their lives.

With each chapter telling its own story, visitors to the reserve can select specific areas to explore, and relive the adventures Teda, Colmac and Thegar experienced with Uncle Joe.

Nature books such as this one have helped to establish the Limberlost Forest as one of Canada's most interesting and accessible wildlife reserves. In addition, trail maps highlighting the reserve's many unique features guide visitors in their exploration of the reserve's extensive summer hiking and winter ski trails.

Other Limberlost publications record the history of the area through words and photographs from the arrival of the early settlers, through to the establishment of the Limberlost Lodge as one of Ontario's pre-eminent year-round wilderness resorts almost 100-years ago.

Hikers, photographers, artists, bird watchers, students and members of the general public are encouraged to visit the reserve and enjoy the adventures described in this book.

Chapter 1

The Conundrum

True to their word and the solemn pact Colmac and Thegar made in the summer of 1998, they kept the secret of the Pirate-Trapper's cave to themselves, only broaching it on weekends when they were working alone building trails on the Limberlost Forest & Wildlife Reserve.

They had agreed to re-enter the cave and take greater stock of its contents after the snow had melted and they could approach the cave without leaving evidence of their visit. However, when spring arrived, and with so much to do, it seemed easier to leave the cave and its contents undisturbed, and keep their secret to themselves.

Their greatest fear was that if they told anyone else about the contents of the cave, it would expose the wilderness reserve to visits from government officials, university professors, and even worse, have it inundated by a motley crew of claim jumpers seeking a piece of the pirate hoard.

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Colmac had made a point of reading everything he could lay his hands on about pirates in the early to late-1800s. He discovered that to avoid prosecution, a number of pirates accepted commissions from the English government to hunt down and destroy their former brethren who continued to plunder the Caribbean trade routes. In return, they themselves were pardoned and escaped being taken back to London and in all likelihood hung.

Furthermore, the pardoned pirates were permitted to retain a portion of any treasure they captured as a bounty for their efforts. Any pirate ships captured in battle were to be sunk, or if in good order, handed over to the English navy.

It was not always as simple as that. The pardoned pirates seldom gave the crown a proper count and naval officers would use this as an excuse to dispute the authenticity of a pirate's written commission, shoot or hang them on the spot and claim a victory for themselves.

And even if the pardoned pirates survived this treachery, there was always the danger of their enemies or even old colleagues finding them in their retirement in order to even an earlier score, or to take back all or part of the treasure that they felt was rightfully theirs.

From his reading, Colmac quickly came to the conclusion that it was no wonder that old pirates did their best to disappear, seeking hide-outs that were a considerable distance from the preying eyes of town's people. The less people knew about them and the more inhospitable the area

they chose to hide, the less likely old enemies would come venturing back into their lives.

This version of history accorded well with the myths that floated around the Town of Huntsville in northern Ontario about a trapper, who periodically traded furs as well as gold coins for supplies.

He would then promptly disappear without a trace, sometimes for a year or more. He was reputed to be a pardoned pirate, but no one had been able to prove this and all attempts to gather information on him and track him through the northern forests had failed.

Colmac's research also extended to modern-day treasure hunters, which only served to heighten his concerns. Recently he had become aware of an individual, who after many years of searching, located a sunken ship off the east coast of Florida laden with gold coins.

The ship had set out during the American civil war from France for North America to make delivery of the coins to the confederate army in order to enable them to secure supplies and pay their soldiers.

After the treasure hunter had invested a significant amount of money in his search for the sunken ship, a number of American states, the federal government and even the heirs of some of the dead soldiers laid claim to the treasure.

The treasure hunter had played it strictly by the book, having tracked down the insurance company who held title

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to the vessel and its contents, and purchased its claim. Even this did not prevent lawsuits being launched and millions of dollars having to be spent to defend the treasure hunter's legitimate rights.

In the process of studying the battles and politics of the period, Colmac became a veritable expert on piracy and buried treasure; winning history prizes at his school for the papers he wrote on the subject. It crossed his mind that this was probably unfair to his schoolmates as his incentive to study history was clearly much greater than his friends or teachers could ever imagine.

The more knowledge Colmac gained on the subject of a finder's rights to a long lost treasure, which he immediately shared with his younger brother Thegar, the more convinced they both became that they should leave the Pirate-Trapper's cave well alone for a few more years, or at least until they were much older and capable of dealing with the consequences of their actions.

They had already made up their minds, that whatever portion of the treasure was eventually judged to be theirs, they would set it aside to be used to protect the Limberlost Forest & Wildlife Reserve.

They also discussed using a portion of the money to help other wilderness conservancies to be established nearby, so that animals could move freely between protected areas, hopefully all the way to Algonquin Park, one of the largest nature parks in the world.

Their ultimate objective was to ensure that human

visitors entering these areas were respectful of the wildlife, the lakes and the natural vegetation of the forests. Working towards achieving these objectives for the Limberlost property kept them busy enough and amply rewarded.

Animal and bird counts were rising each year and new trails were being built and continuously upgraded. The objective was to permit visitors to Limberlost to venture deep into the forests, and by remaining on the trails animal habitats and plant growth were protected from them wandering aimlessly through the reserve.

In the process of building the trails and spending long days exploring Limberlost's forests, lakes and rock formations; Colmac, Thegar, and their sister Teda were learning a great deal about nature and the positive impact it could make on their lives.

All of this – the fears of upsetting the equilibrium of their sanctuary, potential battles with claim-jumpers, trespassers searching for other possible treasures hidden on the property – always seemed to lead them to the same conclusion, which was to leave the Pirate-Trapper's cave for the time being the way they had found it.

It troubled them that this line of reasoning never seemed to fully resolve the ethical dilemmas they were wrestling with. As much as they would remind themselves that they were acting in the best interests of the Limberlost Forest & Wildlife Reserve and all of its constituents – where they knew a great deal of good had been done, but there was even more that they could still do – Colmac's

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inner conscious continued to be somewhat troubled.

Most troublesome was the fact that Colmac and Thegar knew very well that it was preferable not to complicate their lives with secrets; especially between themselves and members of their family. But, they also knew that if they informed their parents about the cave, they in turn may feel obliged to report its existence to the authorities – whomever they may be.

As further justification for being circumspect, they kept reminding themselves that their father had permitted Colmac to keep secret the location of a similar discovery he made along the shoreline of Lake Solitaire. That discovery did not involve a treasure of gold and silver, but something equally precious – ten virtually perfect pictographs drawn on the walls of a cave.

To Thegar's ongoing chagrin, Colmac was the only one who knew the exact location of the pictographs and the precise form of the drawings on its walls. They had all agreed that if they publicized the drawings this would bring unwelcome attention to their wilderness reserve.

Even relying on this as justification, Colmac and Thegar would waiver back and forth, and hence the debate was never finally concluded. However, each spring, when the opportunity came about to re-visit the Pirate-Trapper's cave, without risk of leaving tell-tale tracks in the snow, the decision to keep the existence of the cave to themselves would usually be resolutely reaffirmed.

As soon as the snow was out of the woods, Colmac

and Thegar would venture along the wilderness trail which followed the shoreline of Helve Lake. The trail, at its nearest point, was a good 80-feet from the cave's entrance, which was close enough to observe whether their camouflage efforts were still in place.

Colmac and Thegar made these trips ostensibly in the course of carrying out their responsibilities to inspect the trails each spring and remove protruding branches and fallen trees. This task generally took three full weekends to accomplish, as over 70 kilometres of maintained trails had been constructed on the reserve and a fair commitment of time was needed to cut the branches and saw through the trunks of trees that had fallen across their trails.

It is no surprise that the trail they chose each year for the first inspection trip, was the one that extended around Helve Lake where the Pirate-Trapper's cave was located.

They did this partly to reinforce their resolve to leave everything alone, and partly to satisfy themselves that the camouflage they had placed at the entrance to the cave was still intact and serving its purpose.

It was the fifth spring since their discovery of the Pirate-Trapper's cave, and shortly after Colmac had turned sixteen and with Thegar approaching fifteen, that their resolve would be severely tested.

In the process, without any warning and clearly beyond anything they could have expected at the time, their lives were about to be dramatically changed.

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A Spring Surprise

Colmac and Thegar woke up well before daybreak in order to complete their annual inspection of the Helve Lake Trail and return prior to eleven o'clock that morning to the Dragons Tongue spit, where their family's cottage was located on Lake Solitaire.

They had promised to help their older sister, Teda, with her school project on fungi and Thegar was the only one who knew exactly where a number of exceptional specimens existed on the west side of Lake Solitaire.

The shortest route to Helve Lake was over the Torture Trail to the top of the old ski hill and then down the Ascension Trail to the south side of Buck Lake. It was there that the historic Portage Trail linked Buck Lake with Helve Lake.

With the mild winter, the trails were in surprisingly good shape, requiring very little time to be spent cutting

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through and removing trees that had fallen across the trails they set out to inspect. Many of the trees that had fallen down were relatively small and could easily be sawn into lengths that were dragged deeper into the woods; well out of sight of the trail.

It was about eight o'clock in the morning when they approached Helve Lake and the trail which extended around the western side of the lake. As had become customary, the closer they came to the Pirate-Trapper's cave the more heavily engaged they became with their philosophical deliberations on the ethical and other merits of keeping the knowledge of their discovery to themselves.

They had taken different sides this time. Colmac was making the case for involving their parents while Thegar defended the position they had both stuck by for nearly five years.

As in the past, when they reached the section of the trail closest to the Pirate-Trapper's cave, they glanced up the hill to the camouflaged cave entrance.

It was Colmac, who was known among his family and friends to have outstanding visual perception, who excitedly exclaimed, "What's that! Something has definitely changed!"

Thegar, who had been wondering the same thing, stood still with his arm extended to hold his brother back from rushing up to the cave entrance.

He quietly said in barely a whisper, "Let's be care-

ful. Perhaps it is just an earth fall or perhaps some animal dragged those branches down, or perhaps someone found the treasure and booby trapped the area.”

Thegar could always be counted on to think of the most outrageous possibilities, but there had been many occasions when he was proven to be correct. They stood very still on the Helve Lake Trail for a good couple of minutes, looking around to see if they had been followed, listening for sounds of another person in the area, and trying to decide what to do next.

Thegar wondered aloud whether they should go back and seek Teda’s advice as she was two years older than Colmac and pretty level headed. As the head girl at her high school, in their minds, she was almost as good as an adult and could be sworn to secrecy.

Colmac was not going to have any of that. He had received extensive training in the army cadet corps, alongside army regulars, and was confident he could find and work his way around any booby trap, which in any event, he mused was sure to be very rudimentary.

With Colmac winning the point, they inched forward towards the cave, taking a very circuitous route as Colmac claimed that booby traps were virtually always placed on the most natural route. As they approached the cave, it became ever clearer to them that someone, and not an animal, had disturbed the camouflage they had carefully placed at its entrance.

Thegar whispered, “This makes no sense. Why would

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someone do this? If they found the cave, why would they have not left it the way they found it? There are plenty of tree branches nearby and the rocks we used to do the trick are still lying around. Why did they not use them? Why would they have placed these three larger rocks in front of the cave entrance? They don't look very natural, so surely that is not the reason for going to so much trouble."

Colmac was quick to agree. "This is very, very strange. It is possible that the treasure has been taken. I'm for getting some matches from the Helve Fishing Lodge at the end of the lake and for making a small opening, large enough to crawl in and see if the chest is still full."

Thegar replied, "That is not necessary, I have matches in my safety kit, together with the whistle and compass. I left it on the trail with the axe and bow saw when we climbed up here. Why don't you start making an opening while I fetch the matches and the axe?"

Colmac agreed but warned Thegar to return to the trail by the circuitous route they had followed. He then exercised similar caution in carefully removing each stick, stone and handful of earth from the area he selected to start making the crawl space to enter the cave.

On returning, Thegar gathered a number of thin dry sticks which he bound together with the cords he had pulled out from the bottom of one of his trouser legs. This was to be the torch which he planned to use to inspect the cave. He felt he should be the one to enter the cave because he knew it better than anyone else, having been in it twice, whereas

Colmac had only entered it once.

Colmac had other ideas, for he felt that if he dug out the entrance, he should enter the cave first. To resolve the issue, they played their customary game of rock-paper-scissors. After losing this unusual finger game twice in a row, Colmac was forced to concede grudgingly that Thegar perhaps was the best person to enter the cave, exclaiming, “Since you are smaller, I will only need to dig a small tunnel.”

Colmac kept to himself his conclusion that it was hardly something worth arguing over – seeing the Pirate-Trapper’s skeleton again and feeling those spider webs clinging to your face!

It took nearly an hour of careful work, using the axe as well as the sturdy stick that Thegar had cut, to clear a tunnel wide enough for a person to crawl safely through.

Immediately on entering the cave Thegar lit his makeshift torch and in the eerie light he could not avoid staring at the Pirate-Trapper’s bed lying directly ahead. As much as Thegar tried to turn his head away, his eyes became glued on the old pirate’s bones sticking out of the decaying bed fabrics, sending icy shivers down his spine.

Once Thegar had recovered his composure, he started to feel a sense of relief. In fact, it felt much the same as when Jupiter, his dog, was found after being missing for a few days. The Pirate-Trapper had been much in Thegar’s thoughts over the past five years and he did not want any harm to come to his remains. Thegar felt strongly that he

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deserved a respectable burial at the site he had chosen at the top of the hill overlooking Helve Lake.

Eventually, Thegar was able to turn his head slowly to the left, holding the make-shift torch well away from his own clothes and any other combustible material, as small burning twigs from the torch were breaking off and falling to the ground.

He quickly took three steps forward, bringing himself within two feet of the table and the adjacent chest. The few coins on the table, which were the first items to have caught his eye on his initial visit to the cave, were still there although the dust around them seemed to have been disturbed.

The very next moment, Thegar was suddenly startled by Colmac's voice booming into and echoing through the cave, "Thegar, what have you found? Is everything O.K.?"

Once Thegar recovered, he yelled back impatiently to Colmac, "I don't know yet. I need more time to tell!"

Thegar's next challenge was to open the treasure chest. He quickly realized that this would not be easy as he had one hand fully employed taking care of the torch. As Thegar inched forward, he wished Colmac was with him to assist in lifting the heavy chest lid.

Thegar transferred the torch to his right hand in order to hold it as far away from the chest as possible while he prepared to use his left hand to lift the lid. As he bent down and touched the lid, his eye caught sight of a small white

envelope that had not been lying on the chest on his previous two visits to the cave.

Without hesitation, he picked up the envelope and stuffed it into his left trouser leg pocket and then quickly jerked up the lid, knowing that the torch light would soon be running out. To his relief, the glittering sight he had hoped for was as startling as before – many shining coins, pieces of jewelry and countless precious multi-coloured stones!

With scarcely time to assess the situation, the torch disintegrated, scattering the few remaining sticks and twigs in small clumps on the cave floor.

Instinctively, Thegar stamped on the glowing sticks for fear of setting any of the contents of the cave on fire. At the same time, he shouted out to Colmac, “The treasure is safe, but please move away from the tunnel entrance so that I can see where it is and find my way out of here.”

It was almost pitch dark in the cave, other than the faint light penetrating through the tunnel entrance. The light was not sufficient to help him avoid the spider webs and dangling roots hanging from the ceiling of the cave. There were also numerous cooking utensils and other items strewn on the floor of the cave. Slowly he slid one foot at a time carefully forward, extending his hands in front of himself in order to avoid bumping his head against the cave roof or walls.

It seemed like an eternity, but a minute or so later, with Thegar on his knees groping for the entrance, that

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he felt the long trimmed branch that Colmac was waving around from his position at the entrance to the cave to help guide him out of the tunnel. As soon as he had a firm grasp on the branch, Colmac began to gently tug; helping to hasten Thegar's return to the outside world.

At first gasping, and then taking deep controlled breaths, Thegar desperately tried to clear his lungs of the dank, foul air which had been trapped in the cave. At the same time he waved his hands wildly up and down and across his body, trying to brush off the cob webs and imaginary spiders and other insects that he felt were clinging to his clothes.

Eventually Thegar calmed down enough to babble to Colmac, "Everything looks like it was. The Pirate's bones are untouched, the coins are there and the treasure chest seems as full as ever. The only sign of change was an envelope which I have in my pocket."

Reaching into his pocket, Thegar passed the envelope to Colmac who held it up to the light from force of habit, rather than any other reason. They were both quick to notice the bold printing on the envelope:

To Whom it May Concern!

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The Message

Without giving a second thought to opening the envelope, Colmac exclaimed, “Let’s re-camouflage the cave entrance and get out of here fast. The letter reading can wait.”

Having taken the camouflage apart in order to excavate the tunnel, Colmac took responsibility for re-sealing the entrance and making it look the way they found it, while at the same time looking as natural as possible.

Thegar assisted Colmac by passing rocks, sticks and hatfuls of earth to him as he masterfully restored the area to look much like the way they had left it nearly five years earlier.

When nearing completion, Thegar congratulated Colmac for doing a better job than the intruder, but observed that, “Perhaps he left it messy on purpose, knowing that we were the only ones who would notice that he had been here. He probably wanted to be sure that we would eventually

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collect our mail. Let's read it now."

Colmac replied, "No, let's leave this place. The letter can wait. We can stop at the large flat rock at the north end of Helve Lake and read it there. At least we will be warmer and in the sun, and I am sure we will feel much safer being in the open and able to see all around us."

Thegar needed no further persuasion. He finished dusting off his clothes, shook the remaining dirt out of the inside of his hat, picked up the axe and started to work his way back down to the trail. Both he and Colmac took care to hide their tracks and dragged fallen branches over the areas which seemed to have been more heavily trampled.

When they reached the trail they ran most of the way back to the flat rock, slowing down only to cross the beaver dam, through which the water from Helve Lake flowed on its way to Buck Lake. This had always been one of their more favourite spots to stop and take a rest before venturing deeper into the forests around Helve Lake.

For Thegar, on this particular day, the rock provided a bright open space in stark contrast to the confines of the dark musty cave. The rock, which slanted gently into the lake, was already warm from the heat of the early morning sun.

Lying down on the rock to obtain the maximum transfer of warmth, Colmac carefully opened the envelope to find a single page of writing. The words were written in small bold printed letters similar to the printing on the envelope.

Thegar glanced at the letter, but rather than bothering to examine it himself, was quite satisfied to have Colmac read it aloud.

Colmac took a deep breath and quietly read:

To whom it may concern:

Members of my family have been searching for this treasure hoard for nearly 150 years.

It was placed here by my great-great Uncle Archibald MacTeer. I have a map to prove it.

If you are who I think you are, I believe I can trust you to leave the chest and its contents untouched, just as I have, until we have an opportunity to meet and talk.

If I am wrong, it won't take me long to find out who you are and track you down.

You can contact me by leaving a note with only your name and telephone number on it in a can behind the large white pine growing on the beach at the south end of Little Twin Lake.

Hopefully, Friends To Be.

“Phew!”, exclaimed Colmac, “I don’t know what to think. In one sentence it seems so friendly and then in the next it seems as though the ghost of the Pirate-Trapper has returned, threatening to hunt us down to punish us for disturbing him. He is probably angry because you removed that one gold coin from the cave on your first visit.”

Thegar was as much at a loss at clarifying his

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thoughts, “Wow! . . . Wow! . . . They say treasures always bring trouble. People fight over them, thinking it is easier to grab someone else’s fortune than to work hard to make their own. Let’s get back to Dragons Tongue. I will be able to think better there and we can talk to Teda in confidence. She always seems to have a clearer head on matters like this. We need her help anyhow, in case we have to explain why we have not said anything about the cave for five years. Wow! . . . I think we could be heading for trouble.”

“Not necessarily,” interrupted Colmac. “Perhaps the bad pirate genes have long since been bred out of the family and the writer really wants to be a friend. Furthermore, there surely seems to be plenty for everyone to share.”

By running most of the way, it took Colmac and Thegar less than half the time it had taken to reach the cave, to return to their cabin at Dragons Tongue. They only walked on the steepest hills and when it was absolutely necessary in order to catch their breath. Much thinking was taking place, but few words were exchanged as they were not only short of breath, but also terribly confused.

Notwithstanding the speed of their return to Dragons Tongue, it was well past eleven o’clock when they arrived back at their family’s log cabin. As they wound their way down Torture Trail, they agreed that they should first help Teda with her search for fungi specimens before seeking her advice.

It was no great surprise to find Teda waiting for them at the boat slip, plastic specimen jars in hand and not hesi-

tating for a moment before admonishing them for being late. Their apologies fell on deaf ears as Teda continued to express her annoyance as she exclaimed, “This is yet another example of your irresponsible ways! Will you ever learn to be reliable?”

Colmac whispered to Thegar, “This clearly is not the time to engage her in a discussion about what we should do next.”

Thegar scurried to the tool shed to collect three life jackets and a spare paddle while Colmac readied their small motor boat. The boat was needed to reach the west side of Lake Solitaire where the fungi were located.

On his way back, Thegar heard Teda halt her lecturing to call to him, “Don’t forget the bells for your boots and the bear-bangers, as we need them to scare off any bears who might be curious about us walking through the woods at this time of the year.”

When Thegar returned to the boat slip, Colmac and Teda were already in the boat and Colmac was about to start the motor, hoping to drown out Teda’s ongoing lecture on being unreliable, missing deadlines and how discourteous it was to keep other people waiting.

Rather than proceed directly to the Brenn Landing, Colmac wisely elected to follow the shoreline as the ice had only recently melted and the water was still frigid. Striking a fallen log and falling into the water in the middle of the lake would be very dangerous, whereas as long as they were fifty feet or so from the shore, they could easily make

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it to safety.

On reaching the Brenn Landing, they set out due west towards McReynolds Lake, being very careful as they approached the heron rookery. In order to create as little disturbance as possible, they circled around the surrounding wetlands where the large heron nests were lodged high up in the dead-standing trees along the far bank.

A short while later they reached a valley that was heavily wooded with mature trees. It was there that Thegar started to point out different fungi specimens, which Teda promptly photographed. The most curious types were those that entirely encircled decaying tree trunks, sticking out in perfect rows, sometimes covering a height of three feet or more.

“I believe these are excellent examples of Turkey Tail fungi otherwise known as polypores”, Teda expertly announced. “They are apparently quite delicious, if you are adventurous enough to eat them.”

Teda was also delighted with the Artist Conch fungi specimens, which were plentiful and in various stages of growth. Since there were so many, she collected twenty or so mature specimens, which she planned to decorate in much the same manner as the indigenous inhabitants had done hundreds of years earlier. Once they were dried, she intended to give them away as gifts to her classmates.

Colmac repeatedly urged Teda to hurry up as he wanted to return to Dragons Tongue, mentioning that they had something they wished to show her. She kept putting them

off, reminding Colmac that they were the ones to blame for them being so late.

With Teda engrossed with her findings, it was nearly one o'clock in the afternoon before she finally indicated that she was finished searching for additional fungi specimens, and they could start heading back to the boat. On returning to the Brenn Landing, Colmac sat on the side of the boat and asked Teda to listen to Thegar and him for a few moments.

Teda realized that it made no sense to protest as Colmac seemed determined and she needed either him or Thegar to operate the boat. Her alternative was not very attractive as it entailed a long walk on the trail that wound its way around the lake.

Taking his cue from Colmac, Thegar said, "Teda, please listen to us without interrupting. We have something very important and perhaps also very dangerous to tell you. I am sure you are going to first think we are kidding you with a wild story. However, I promise that everything we tell you is absolutely true."

Colmac then chimed in, "Teda, we recently discovered a small chest of coins and jewels in a cave near Helve Lake."

Colmac instinctively knew that he had better understate and abbreviate their story in order to give it greater credibility, and anyhow who was to say that five years ago was not recent, particularly in relation to the period the pirate had been alone in the cave.

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By minimizing the size of the treasure and keeping the time period short he also hoped to avoid another lecture, this one about them having no right to have kept a secret from her and their parents.

Next Colmac explained that there was a skeleton in the cave and that they were pretty sure that it was the Pirate-Trapper that Uncle Ted had first told them about.

Thegar interrupted, “Teda, please believe us, because we need your advice on what comes next. When we went by the cave today, we noticed that someone else had been in it, and in checking it out we found this envelope on the treasure chest.”

Teda stared at her brothers in silence, absorbing what they had conveyed to her and waiting for them to go on, not wanting to race to conclusions without being in possession of all of the facts.

Thegar went on, “The treasure chest seems intact, and so that is not the issue. What we need to decide is whether to tell Dad, and if so, how best to do this. We also need your advice on what the letter could mean and how best to respond.”

At this point Thegar reached into his pocket, retrieved the envelope and passed it to Teda, “Why don’t you quickly read the letter and tell us what you think we should do?”

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The Response

Teda opened the envelope and removed the page with the hand printing on it. Before beginning to read, she said, “Boys, why do I feel that this is another one of your wild pranks? I know that April first is next week, but I would not put it past you to start something now, only to say to me on Thursday – *April Fool’s Joke!* – I am not going to fall for it this time.”

Colmac and Thegar were beside themselves, not knowing whether to express their frustration or to try and gently cajole Teda into reading the letter. Colmac decided on the latter course of action, pleading with Teda to read the letter and assuring her that everything they had told her was the absolute truth.

Colmac exclaimed, “Teda, what can I do to convince you?”

Teda carried on with her admonishments, “I told you

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many times before that there would come a time when it was important for people to listen and believe you, and they wouldn't do so, because you had cried wolf one time too often. That is how I feel right now. Give me one good reason why I should feel otherwise . . . ?”

Thegar interrupted Teda, asking her, “You have not answered Colmac. What can either one of us do to persuade you that everything we have said is the truth? If Colmac promises to give you his fly-fishing rod and if I promise to give you my Swiss Army knife should you find that we are not telling you the truth, will you believe us? You have my word on that and I am sure Colmac will agree.”

When Colmac nodded, Teda relented a bit, thinking that this time the boys' wild tale may at least have some truth to it, since Colmac would not lightly part with his treasured fishing gear.

She slowly lifted the letter up and started to read to herself, and then re-read it several more times before she set about analyzing its contents to fully comprehend the messages it conveyed.

After a few minutes of silence, Teda said, “The writer wants you to know that he, or she, has a claim whether legally or morally to the treasure. I am going to assume that the writer is a man as I think a woman would be more subtle with her threats. Whether the map is genuine or prepared after the fact is something yet to be proven, and who says the writer is really the great-great nephew of Archibald MacTeer, the fabled pirate?”

Teda continued, “Next, he hopes to get you to let your guard down by stating he believes he can trust you. He surely wants to know whom you have told and perhaps find out if you have the key to the location of the second rumoured treasure. You probably remember there were supposed to be two.”

Glancing back at the letter, Teda exclaimed, “And, just in case you don’t leave the treasure alone, he threatens to track you down. What was left unsaid is what will be done to you – in true pirate style!”

Continuing, Teda said, “The last sentence is pretty clear. Fortunately we know the place where he wants you to leave your response. The challenge is to find out more about him than he knows about you before you meet to discuss your find. Successful people make a point of knowing their foes very well, particularly their strengths, weaknesses and personal preferences. How to do this is what you should spend your time thinking about. You may want to read the book *The Art of War*, before you take this any further.”

Thegar, who prided himself in having the mind of a detective; particularly since taking on a part time job at the Spy Depot, a detective agency and spy equipment store, exclaimed, “I have got it. Let’s put a false response at the White Pine tree and when he comes to collect the letter we photograph him with my wildlife motion-activated camera. I can retrieve it from the Hidden Cliffs where I presently have it set up to find out once and for all whether wolves

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still frequent that portion of the Solitaire Trail.”

Teda responded, “The camera is a great idea, but I would be very careful in messing around with a professed descendent of a pirate, and you should not forget the threat to track you down if you try to be too cute or double-cross him. At a minimum, I suggest you wear disguises when you place the camera in a tree, just in case he is watching. In fact, I think you should try very hard to look like adults.”

By then Teda was deep into the adventure, and without expressing it, none of them had any intention to bring anyone else into their secret until they had found out a whole lot more.

Colmac exclaimed, “These are great ideas, but let’s get back to the cabin and pick up the camera on the way. Teda, perhaps you can think about the message we should put in the can. I know that he said he only wants our names and a phone number.”

Both boys then stood up and started to re-launch their boat, calling for Teda to bring her fungi specimens.

A half hour later they were back at their cabin on the east side of the lake. They had kept their thoughts much to themselves for most of the trip as they individually mulled over the course of action they felt should be taken.

On arriving, Thegar volunteered to heat up a pizza for a late lunch. While they waited they sat at the kitchen counter going over the precise details of their next steps.

First, they decided that only two of them would make

the trip to the white pine tree and that this should be by canoe rather than using the old Twin Lakes logging road. Although it would take much longer, they agreed that a canoe trip would be more discrete as they could pass very quietly through a chain of four lakes. This route would definitely attract far less attention, especially if they set out before sunrise.

Next, they agreed that straws should be drawn to decide which of them would go and who would stay behind to get help if they were not back within five hours.

Finally, Thegar described a number of different disguises they could wear to confuse the letter writer in case he saw them. They settled on wearing their father's old business suits in order to make them appear as adults.

They all realized that they could not make the delivery until the next day, even if they wanted to, as it would be dark before they returned. Therefore, they had little choice but to defer it until day break the next morning before heading out.

Deviating slightly from Teda's earlier advice, they inscribed only Colmac's first name on a sheet of paper together with his e-mail address. They had concluded that a telephone number could pose a difficult problem in the event their parents or anyone else answered or overheard the call.

The balance of the day and most of the evening was spent going over and over the courses of action available to them, including lengthy discussions on the appropriateness

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of using the treasure to develop and expand their wilderness sanctuary.

They kept returning to the same conclusion. Limberlost was integral to their future lives and how they planned to spend time together as a family. They knew they were privileged to have this opportunity and were determined to fulfill their commitments to improve the property and make it more accessible to others; particularly those less fortunate than themselves.

They also believed that anything that could make the achievement of these goals more certain should be pursued. Colmac and Thegar had intuitively felt this way about the treasure when it was first discovered, and with Teda's involvement, and the fact that she quickly came around to be equally supportive, provided the two boys the extra comfort they had been searching for.

They were particularly pleased with Teda's assuring words that, "It should be O.K. to keep our knowledge of the cave to ourselves, at least until we have all the relevant facts."

Before retiring, Thegar insisted on them drawing straws. Even though he was left with the short straw he claimed it was essential that he go as he was the only one who knew how to set up the camera and furthermore, being the smallest he could hide under a tarpaulin in the canoe as they approached Little Twin Lake. He reminded them of Teda's earlier advise about confusing your foes.

Rather than drawing new straws, Teda conceded that

perhaps it was best for the boys to make the trip while she remained behind with responsibility for getting help should they not return within five hours.

As usual, Thegar was the first to wake up in the morning. Before disturbing his brother and sister, he set about checking and rechecking the motion-activated camera. Finally he was satisfied that he could assemble the pieces of equipment quickly and discretely when they reached the giant white pine. He then packaged the camera in bubble wrap and sealed it with sufficient air in a garbage bag so that it would float in the event the canoe capsized.

Shortly before six o'clock, he woke up Teda and Colmac. After a quick breakfast they loaded their ultra-light Kevlar canoe on the twenty year old workhorse Jeep they were permitted to drive on the reserve. Ten minutes later they arrived at the south east corner of Buck Lake, which was the closest point the road came to the portage from Buck Lake to Poverty Lake.

They paddled across Buck Lake to the portage and then canoed down Poverty Lake for three kilometres before passing through the rocky narrows which led into Crotch Lake. They then portaged two hundred metres to enter Eighteen Mile Lake, otherwise known as Twin Lake.

Upon reaching the southern end of Twin Lake, they carefully maneuvered their canoe over a low beaver dam to descend into the waters of Little Twin Lake. At this point, Thegar lay down in the canoe, covering his body with the black tarpaulin they had brought along to conceal him.

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With Colmac paddling on his own, it took a good fifteen minutes to reach the southern end of Little Twin Lake where the giant white pine was clearly visible, towering above the surrounding trees. Colmac stepped into the water to pull the canoe sideways along the shore to enable Thegar to crawl out using the canoe as cover.

Once behind the trees that grew densely along the shoreline, Thegar stood up and called to Colmac to bring the bag containing the camera equipment. Carefully placing, activating and camouflaging the camera equipment took no more than five minutes. Thegar then tested and retested the wireless adapter to make sure he would receive the digital images on his computer at their school near Port Hope.

In the meanwhile, Colmac placed the silver candy tin with his first name and his e-mail address inside, against the east side of the trunk of the giant white pine, exactly where they were instructed to leave their response.

Next, Thegar returned to the boat the same way as he had crawled out of it, ensuring he was out of sight from anyone around the lake. Once Thegar was in the canoe, Colmac re-launched it for the return journey.

Exactly four and a half hours after leaving, they returned to their cabin on Lake Solitaire. Even though they were within the time limit they had agreed on, Teda was pacing in front of the cabin when they arrived, counting down the minutes before she would be obliged to call for help.

However, when they appeared at the top of the hill on the road leading to their cabin, and she later heard everything had gone according to their plan, Teda was obviously relieved, saying, “There is nothing we can do now until we either hear from him or we retrieve the photo images next weekend.”

Thegar was quick to proudly proclaim, “That’s incorrect. If I have set the equipment up properly, it should send the images directly to me in much the same way as a webcam allows Dad to observe the progress on construction sites. Last week Gerald at the Spy Depot gave me a wireless adapter and battery pack which should accomplish this. As soon as I find out if it actually works, I’ll get in touch with you.”

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Discovering Joe MacTeer

Two days later, when Thegar returned to his room at Trinity College on the shores of Lake Ontario, he eagerly connected his computer and started to search for possible images transmitted by the motion activated camera he placed near to the giant white pine on Little Twin Lake.

After searching through a number of blurry images for ten minutes or more, a series of clearer pictures started to appear of a squirrel attempting to bite the tin can they had placed at the base of the white pine. A number of dark hazy pictures then appeared, probably depicting a bird or a small animal passing by during the night hours.

Thegar was elated as he now knew for certain that the wireless connection worked. His concerns then turned to the strength left in the battery pack, not knowing how much power was required to transmit the images.

Each morning and evening Thegar poured over his

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computer, hoping that his camera had captured a picture of the intruder stopping by to pick up the tin can. On Friday, he rushed to his room for a final check before afternoon classes, as after that there would be a hurried departure by train to return for the weekend to the Limberlost Forest & Wildlife Reserve.

He had worked his way through images of a small bird alighting on the ground near the tin can, a cat-like animal and then to his surprise a series of four images of a large man wearing a long coat. One image was a frontal view of his head, appearing almost as though the individual was staring directly into the camera lens.

On the way to his next class, Thegar rushed to the library and printed out the four images, marveling at their clarity.

When he met Colmac at the railway station, Thegar was quick to blurt out, “It worked! Look here, I have a clear picture of our intruder. He sure looks like a big mean fellow. I can’t wait to tell Teda and then find out who he is. Uncle Ted is our best bet, otherwise we will have to ask around in Dwight Village or the Town of Huntsville . . .”

Colmac interrupted Thegar stating, “Thegar, calm down. The next step is to confirm that he laid his hands on our response to his letter, and in any event, the sooner we recover the camera equipment the better. Therefore let’s plan on driving to the Long Lake fishing camp very early tomorrow morning and then hike the last couple of kilometres to the giant white pine. This will be a lot faster than

canoeing and will probably confuse anyone who may have seen us when we placed the can next to the tree.”

Thegar then asked Colmac, “Isn’t it odd that he has not sent you an e-mail message?”

Colmac, who had spent the past five days eagerly checking his e-mails to no avail, replied, “Probably not odd at all. Who says he has a computer or even knows what an e-mail address is. We could be dealing with a hermit or someone for whom time doesn’t matter.”

Although the trip to the Limberlost Forest & Wildlife Reserve was essentially uneventful, their excitement was unabated when they retired to bed early that night.

As planned, all three children were up half an hour before day break. They set out in their battered old Jeep across the Limberlost property to a fishing cabin located on a grassy point near the south-eastern boundary of the reserve.

There they parked the Jeep in a Quonset hut which had been erected during the Second World War. After closing the large heavy doors behind them they walked west along a logging road to the south end of Little Twin Lake where the giant white pine stood.

As expected, the tin can was gone, and to their great surprise the camera equipment was neatly packed in the garbage bag which Thegar had carefully folded and placed under the legs of the camera’s tripod. The garbage bag and its contents in turn were carefully hidden, covered with

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broken branches and reeds.

The three of them stood in silence, not knowing what to do next. A sense of fright crept over each one of them, worried that the big, hulking intruder they captured on their camera was about to pounce on them with a club in one hand and a shotgun in the other.

Thegar was the first to move. He darted to the camera equipment, pushing aside the branches and dried reeds to peer inside the garbage bag. He immediately exclaimed that the camera itself was missing.

Hoisting the bag under his arm, Thegar whispered, “Let’s get out of here, real fast!” Colmac and Teda required no further encouragement and in short order all three of them were sprinting down the logging road back to their Jeep.

On the way to their cabin on Lake Solitaire, they agreed that they should visit Uncle Ted as soon as possible to find out if he could help identify the person they had captured on their motion-activated camera.

When they found Uncle Ted busy in his workshop, they were suddenly at a loss as to how they should approach the subject. Since their silence appeared strange to him, he questioned whether there had been an accident or if they yet again needed help to get the Jeep out of a mud hole.

Uncle Ted prided himself in being super capable and efficient in recovering their Jeep from even the most difficult spots, but never missed an opportunity to mutter, only

half under his breath, about city folk not knowing how to drive properly on country roads.

Having broken the ice, Thegar answered, “Uncle Ted, the Jeep is outside and in good shape.” Then, trying hard to be nonchalant, Thegar said, “All we are looking for this time is to find out whether you know who this person may be?”

With hardly a glance at the photograph, Uncle Ted replied: “That is old man Joe MacTeer. He and his family have the trapping rights to much of this area, including all of the original Limberlost properties. Why do you ask and where did you get that photo?”

Colmac was quick to respond, “Last week we placed a motion-activated camera on Little Twin Lake hoping to capture pictures of wildlife, and somehow Mr. MacTeer’s picture appeared on our screen.”

“That’s not surprising since Joe has a century-old log cabin at the north end of Little Twin Lake. It stands on sixty acres of land that we have been trying to acquire from his family for the past twenty years with no real success. It is a critical piece of land which we never want falling into a stranger’s hands. I hope you don’t have any thoughts of messing with old Joe?”

Thegar, ever eager to learn as much as possible about anything and everything, assured Uncle Ted that they would never do that. He then enquired, “Is he a good person? What does he do? Do you ever visit with him?”

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Uncle Ted, being a relatively impatient individual, took a deep breath and said, “Very few people know much about Joe. He tends to behave like a hermit, wishing to be left alone once he enters the woods – not too different from some of us by the way! He certainly does not encourage visitors and will act very gruff the first time you come across him in the woods.”

Uncle Ted added, “Yet, when he operated his road construction business, people would say he was not only extremely congenial, but also one of the most learned and generous individuals you could wish to meet.”

“You know, he is close to ninety years old, but he gets about the area as well as a thirty year old and there is not a tree or rock that he doesn’t know and can describe in detail. I see him two or three times a year when he stops by, which is always on a Thursday, to enquire if we need to cull any beaver ponds, which as you know, if not attended to can flood our woodland roads.”

“By the way, he is also our very best unpaid wildlife officer, removing animal traps and generally making life pretty miserable for poachers. I could spend all day telling you stories about him. Do you really want to know more?”

Before Thegar could respond, Uncle Ted asked: “Do you have another reason to be asking about Joe? Is something up that I should know about? It is odd that when he was here this past Thursday he enquired about the three of you. In fact, his questions were much the same as yours. He wanted to know if you were good people and whether you

have respect for the property . . .”

Thegar quickly interjected, “No. You have probably told us all we wanted to know, and thank you, because it was very interesting. We should be going now; it’s getting late for lunch. Thanks Uncle Ted, bye for now.”

The last thing they wanted to do was to arouse Uncle Ted’s suspicion even further, because he had an uncanny sixth sense that seemed to forewarn him about any mischief they were planning, well before it was ever committed.

Colmac stayed behind for a moment, because he badly wanted to know if there was any danger in visiting Joe MacTeer. Uncle Ted was emphatic that he was the gentlest person he knew; whether with birds, animals or young people, and then added, “There is, however, a good chance he will act very scary when you first meet him, but if you stay calm and respectful, he is just as likely to turn polite and may even talk to you about some of his amazing experiences living much of his life alone in the wilderness.”

“By the way Colmac, if you decide to visit him, give him my regards and tell him I noticed late yesterday that we indeed do have need of his help. There is a problem brewing with the beavers damming the Hickory Lake stream below the sand pit, behind the barn.”

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The First Meeting

Over lunch, it did not take long for Teda, Colmac and Thegar to agree that they should visit Joe MacTeer at the earliest opportunity. Rather than leave it to the following weekend, they planned to start out the next day by canoe, well before sunrise.

With three of them paddling, and mindful of time, they managed to take less than two hours to pass through the chain of four lakes, into which the waters from Buck Lake flowed. Having made excellent progress it was still very early in the morning when they approached the north shore of Little Twin Lake.

From the lake they could see no sign of the century old log cabin Uncle Ted had told them about. They therefore pulled their canoe onto the shore and started to hike westward along the northern side of the lake.

They soon came across a fairly well trodden trail that

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ran twenty feet or so parallel to the lake, which made it a lot easier to walk. Three hundred yards along the trail, they caught sight of a log cabin from which a small wisp of smoke was wafting from the stone chimney.

Feeling fairly confident that they had found Mr. MacTeer's cabin, they removed their caps and instinctively tidied their hair in preparation for meeting him. They had agreed among themselves before hand to be exceptionally polite and to do their best not to surprise Mr. MacTeer.

As they approached the door to the cabin Colmac called out to Mr. MacTeer in his friendliest voice. His call was instantly matched by loud barking from a dog inside the cabin.

A few moments later, a large man opened the cabin door and motioned to them to enter as he said, "I've been waiting for the three of you. Come inside and have some coffee."

The friendly tone of his voice and the invitation to enter the cabin provided a tremendous sense of relief to all three of them. He seemed no different from one of their schoolteachers who wished to discuss a term paper.

When they entered the cabin, directly in front of them was a thick wooden table with four rough-hewn benches. The table stood to the right of the fireplace and close to a large window. Mr. MacTeer pulled out a bench for Teda to sit on and waved to the boys to seat themselves.

No further words had been exchanged to this point,

which was too much for Thegar, who by his nature was very comfortable in initiating conversation, even with complete strangers.

Looking directly at Mr. MacTeer, Thegar said, “Thank you Sir for inviting us into your home. My name is Thegar. This is my sister Teda and my brother Colmac. We hoped to meet you as we understand you wrote to us sometime back and perhaps you know where I could find my camera.”

Mr. MacTeer replied immediately, “I am not one to beat about the bush, so I will come directly to the point. I do have your camera, it is over there near the fire place. I took it to make sure it did not get damaged or taken away by a raccoon or some other animal. I also wanted to increase the chances of you paying me a visit, sooner rather than later.”

Mr. MacTeer took a long sip of his coffee before he continued in a more business like tone, “However, more importantly, I look forward to discussing the other business I believe we have between us. You obviously have read my note but I am sure there is a lot more that we would like to know about each other.”

Silence prevailed for a few moments, leading Teda to state, “Mr. MacTeer, we are here to answer all of your questions and hopefully to part as friends. Why don’t you fire away, Sir.”

Mr. MacTeer answered, “I’m Joe MacTeer, and please call me Joe, or if you are more comfortable, Uncle Joe. I have lived on this property almost from the day I was born. It means a great deal to me, and from what I have seen and

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been told, you have many of the same feelings for your land and forests as I do. Is that really the case?”

Colmac immediately responded, “Yes Sir, I mean, Uncle Joe. I can assure you we are different from most city people of our age as we truly do appreciate how fortunate we are to have the Limberlost property to enjoy and learn from. We believe that each time we leave we should try to have done something to make it a better place for everyone, including the animals that live here.”

Mr. MacTeer gently interjected, “I am satisfied for the moment that you are well intentioned when it comes to nature and its needs. There will be more time for that later, but first tell me, if you feel comfortable doing so, who else knows about your discovery and how did you find it?”

Thegar was tempted to mention that others had been told, as he had visions of Mr. MacTeer knocking them off and keeping the treasure all for himself. However, better judgement prevailed as he instinctively knew that trust was going to be an essential part of any relationship they might develop.

So instead, Thegar recited in considerable detail the discovery of the cave, the fact they had kept it to themselves, the reasons for doing so and their plans for using it to protect the Limberlost Forest & Wildlife Reserve.

Once Thegar had ended, which was nearly fifteen minutes later, Mr. MacTeer simply stated, “Very impressive, young man. Very impressive indeed.”

Teda drew considerable comfort from this vote of approval and in turn started to ask Mr. MacTeer a slew of questions, “How did you find the cave? Have you told anyone else? Can we see your map and know your intentions?”

Mr. MacTeer took a deep breath and then said, “Well, my Great-Great Uncle Archibald is purported to have divided his fortune in order to leave an equal amount for each of his two brothers.”

Continuing, Mr. MacTeer said, “However, because they were in England and his home was in the woods in Canada, which happens to be now part of the Limberlost Forest & Wildlife Reserve, he never actually gave it to them, but arranged for his attorney in Huntsville to provide each of them with a map showing them where to locate their portion of his fortune.”

After taking a long sip of his tea, Mr. MacTeer continued, “They searched the property for years but to no avail. For more than one hundred years, at least one person in each new generation would get their hopes up and make their own search. That is why you may have found so many holes dug on the property. You probably have noticed the mounds of earth piled to this day next to these holes.”

Colmac interjected, “We have seen many of these mounds, but always thought they were pre-dug graves for the Mafia or someone else wanting to dispose of something or somebody in a hurry.”

Mr. MacTeer chuckled at this and continued, “It is now clear that my distant Uncle Archibald did not trust

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his attorney and in true pirate fashion – which I guess you have already figured out he probably was – had misdrawn the maps with the intention of providing his brothers with the code to interpret them correctly. Unfortunately he died before passing the code on to them.”

Mr. MacTeer then got up and removed a faded map from a large book and asked the three children, “Let’s see if you can interpret this map, now that you know where his fortune is actually placed?”

Teda, Colmac and Thegar poured over the map, raising various theories, none of which quite held together when challenged.

After a few more minutes of deep concentration, Colmac, who had started to prepare trail maps of the Limberlost Forest & Wildlife Reserve at the age of eight and was the most familiar with the shape of each of the twenty lakes on the property, exclaimed that he recognized the lake drawn on the Pirate-Trapper’s map.

He said, “The way it is drawn it resembles Buck Lake, with the cross indicating the treasure on the east side, while we know we found the cave on the west side of Helve Lake. Therefore either this is the map prepared for your Uncle’s other brother, or Sir, your family’s map has been deliberately drawn flipped over.”

Colmac continued, “If you turn it the right way round, it becomes Helve Lake. From drawing our earliest trail maps, I have always been intrigued by the fact that Buck Lake and Helve Lake have much the same shape.”

“Furthermore, the water flows out of the lakes through similarly placed bays. You don’t notice their similarity as one of the lakes in reality is turned around and faces the opposite direction to the other. If you turn your Uncle’s map around, the treasure mark matches exactly the spot where we found the cave.”

Teda exclaimed, “Colmac you are absolutely correct and Mr. MacTeer I guess this is sufficient evidence for us that you have a rightful claim . . .”

Mr. MacTeer interrupted Teda, “Slow down young lady, you are going too fast. Who says I didn’t fake the map to trick you. What about ‘finders keepers.’ We will have plenty of time to discuss our respective rights later. Let’s get to know and trust each other first. You should also know what got me to start looking once again for the treasure.”

Teda confidently answered, “Yes, that sounds very fair and it would of course be interesting to know how you knew where to look this time.”

Mr. MacTeer took a deep breath, which seemed to be his custom when he was about to speak at length, and said, “When I read about a near perfect Spanish gold doubloon being donated to the Huntsville Heritage Museum, my suspicions were immediately aroused.”

“After making enquiries and finding out that the coin was supposed to have been found by you two boys in a stream on the Limberlost property, I knew right away that something did not ring true. How could a gold coin be in

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perfect condition if it had been in a stream for all these years? Movements in a stream are abrasive and gold is one of the softest metals. The milled edges at least would have been worn. This led me to believe that the gold coin came from a protected area – either buried or from a box.”

Thegar realized that he had better explain how the coin had made its way into his mother’s hands, and quickly confessed, “I removed only one coin from the table in the cave to prove to Colmac that I was not fabricating a story about the treasure. When my mother found it in my sock drawer I was not ready to tell her about the cave, since Colmac and I had pledged to keep our discovery a secret.”

“Instead, I told my mother that I had found the coin in the Kalonga Creek, since that is where we had been working at the time on building a bridge. I did not expect her to insist on donating it to the Huntsville Museum, but she was intrigued with the myths about the old Pirate-Trapper and buried treasure, and felt it was our duty to give the coin to the museum since they were better equipped at piecing the history together. Both Colmac and I felt at the time that it was a mistake to do so.”

Mr. MacTeer responded, “Well, perhaps not. It has brought us together and I have good feelings about what can be done with the treasure. But first, let me explain how I found the cave. I knew I needed to examine the land around each of the lakes on the property to look for trampled ground or other disturbances.”

“I started with Buck Lake as it resembled the treasure

map, then worked my way around High Lake and Clear Lake before exploring Helve Lake. The dead branches hiding the entrance to the cave were suspicious; however, the roots of the fallen tree at first confused me.”

“Not being as sharp as Colmac, it took me a lot longer to realize that the treasure map was reversed. Once I had figured that out, I returned to the suspicious looking branches and dug around them to find loose earth and the entrance to the cave.”

Anxious to have her earlier questions answered, Teda enquired, “Uncle Joe, where do we go from here? You said you had some ideas. Are you going to tell us about them today? You know what we planned to do with the treasure.”

After taking his customary deep breath, Mr. MacTeer responded, “I have given this a fair amount of thought. People always seem to fight over treasure, but I want no part of that. My hope would be that all of us are well intentioned, share similar dreams about this unique property, and are committed to making these lands a very special place for others to always enjoy. If the treasure can help in this respect, it will be wonderful. I was truly amazed and very moved by Thegar’s account of your intentions. They seem to match my own thoughts.”

“I would like you to leave today thinking about whether we should work together to make this possible. If you do, I will teach you everything I know about the wilderness and I am sure I will learn a great deal from you too. I suggest we document what we learn in a nature book

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for others to share. It is something I have always wanted to do, but, knowing that I'm not a very good writer, I never set about it."

Mr. MacTeer continued, "You could be the catalyst I have needed, and furthermore I bet at least one of you is an exceptional writer. Let's plan to meet at the same time two weeks from now. We can then consider any second thoughts you may have, but in the meantime, let's prepare ourselves to discuss the role nature has played in determining values in society in general. This can be the topic of our first working meeting and the initial entry into the journal."

All three children were over-awed with this gentle kindly man, who was laying no apparent claim to the treasure, other than wanting to know for certain that they were decent people, committed to protecting the wilderness, and if they fell short, it seemed as though he was offering to help them become worthy custodians in the future.

Teda was the first to blurt out, "Thank you Mr. MacTeer. Thank you so much for your generosity. We will try our very best not to let you down, or the people who will come to Limberlost in the future to find peace with themselves and the world around them."

Colmac and Thegar chimed in with similar responses as they rose from the table to leave. To their great surprise he gave each of them a hug and sent them on their way feeling that they were at the beginning of a very special relationship.

Chapter 7

Nature and Life

The two weeks flew by with many exciting conversations taking place between Teda, Colmac and Thegar as they prepared for their next visit with Mr. MacTeer. They knew they had to do their preparation well, including assembling a collection of wise sayings and their own observations relating to the role of nature in their everyday lives.

On the trip north to their wilderness cabin they decided the best way to present their views would be to share with Mr. MacTeer their book, *Wilderness Values and Other Observations on Life*, which their grandmother helped them prepared two years earlier during a visit to her home in Africa. The book contained their thoughts on twenty key aspects of life, including four relating specifically to nature.

When they arrived at Mr. MacTeer's cabin, they were warmly welcomed and invited to take their seats around the same table they used on their previous visit. This time Mr.

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MacTeer offered them oatmeal biscuits and sweet buns in addition to the mugs of strong black coffee.

“It is very good to have you back here. I have been looking forward to seeing how effective we are at brainstorming. Hopefully Teda or one of you boys will do a good job recording our better thoughts,” started Mr. MacTeer.

Continuing, he added, “I imagine from your school history lessons you have noted the profound impact nature, and the rugged rural life of the early eighteenth and nineteenth century settlers had on the development of personal rights, property ownership and the different views which exist regarding group control and personal freedoms.”

Colmac, the most avid student of history between the three of them, said, “I have never quite thought of it that way, however, I have been intrigued at how many of the words of wisdom passed down by parents to their children are closely linked to the wilderness and the predominantly agricultural livelihoods of the early settlers.”

Colmac continued, “For example, we have all heard that you can lead a horse to water but you cannot make the horse drink. We are similarly told to take care about what we do in life, because we are sure to reap what we sow.”

Thegar added, “When we associate with bad company, my mother is quick to remind us that birds of a feather flock together; and to contain our greed we are told that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. And when we are envious we are warned that the grass always appears greener on the other side of the fence.”

Mr. MacTeer, wanting to return the conversation back to the historical connections between nature and societal values, said, “I am not at all surprised that nature has played such a large role in shaping the personal values passed on to us by our grandparents, parents and others. It was not so long ago that 75% of the world’s population was firmly rooted in the soil, down from as high as 90% one-hundred years ago.”

Continuing, Mr. MacTeer said, “Today, these demographics have been reversed with 75% of the population dwelling in cities, which is probably the reason that most recent sayings are related more to the hustle and bustle of urban life, its entertainments and professional sports. I worry about this, because these lessons do not seem to have the same deep meaning as those based on the land.”

Teda, not wanting to seem to be contradicting Mr. MacTeer, gently offered, “We certainly do find the time we spend in the wilderness helps us to think constructively about life in general. Our father is always trying to persuade us to apply the lessons we learn from nature to our everyday lives. This is the principal source for the beliefs and observations recorded in this book we have brought for you Mr. MacTeer. I think you will see that they are clearly nature driven rather than urban based . . . ”

Mr. MacTeer interjected, “Please call me Joe, or if you insist, Uncle Joe. Try it a few times and I am sure you will quickly become accustomed to it. I certainly will feel more comfortable if you do.”

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Uncle Joe then said, “I think we are doing very well and I look forward to reading your book. It sounds like you are already way ahead of me in documenting your thoughts and beliefs.”

Glancing at the introduction to the booklet, he read aloud, “The more we learn together about nature and its impact on our lives, the more there is to learn. – I certainly agree with that!”

Turning to Thegar, Uncle Joe remarked, “Thegar, just last week Ted Rivers told me that you are remarkable at remembering notable sayings and reciting poetry. By the way, I never mentioned the circumstances of our meeting and intend to keep it that way. Ted did tell me that you had a lengthy nature poem written by your father, which you have learned by heart. I look forward to hearing you recite it when we have the time to enjoy it properly. In the meanwhile, share with us some of the sayings, if you have any, about nature that are relevant to our discussions today.”

Thegar hesitated for a moment and then recalled, “Treasure the peaceful sounds of the wilderness as they will save you from the deafening noises of the city. This is the nature saying I like the most.”

“Give us some more like that.” Uncle Joe urged Thegar on.

Thinking for a while before responding, Thegar continued, “O.K. Here are two sayings with similar themes; utilize the peace and tranquility provided by the wilderness to dilute the strains of everyday life. – Here is the other one;

seek your own special place in the wilderness to heal your soul, expand your mind and rejuvenate your body!”

Turning to Teda, Uncle Joe asked “I hope you are recording those sayings. I think they are wonderful and capture many of my own feelings about the time I spend in the woods around here. For much of my life I have tried to learn from the wilderness and appreciate the ways of the wildlife, believing that this also helps me to become more understanding of people and their needs. I firmly believe that a stroll through a forest is the very best place to observe the true character of your friends, colleagues, and strangers.”

Colmac, in agreeing with Uncle Joe, added, “I have learned more about my friends when canoeing with my summer camp mates and in working with friends to build our trails, than all of the time we spend at school together. For many of them, they just can’t seem to understand that wilderness trails protect the plants and animal homes from damaged caused by humans, as well as making it easier for animals and people who wish to pass the same way.”

Uncle Joe continued on the same vein, “I remember reading about how much personal satisfaction could be derived from building a trail or planting trees. Think of how a trail can ease a stranger’s passage, and the shade your trees can provide for people or shelter for animals you may never meet or see. Knowing inside yourself that you have done something good to improve the land always seems, at least to me, to be a tremendous reward in itself. Thegar,

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why don't you give us a final word of wisdom before we go for a walk and I show you some amazing sights in this part of the forest.”

Thegar, once more taking his time to collect his thoughts, said, “Think carefully before moving one grain of sand, diverting a drop of water, or transgressing an animal trail, for everything has taken many years to find its place and if disturbed may never be the way it should be.”

Uncle Joe exclaimed, “The three of you are amazing. How do you do it?”

Teda's response was, “Uncle Joe, we must confess, you told us to do our homework and that is what we did. You should know, however, that Thegar has this unique ability to repeat exactly what he decides is important to remember. He told us that he felt today was going to be of critical importance for all of us and indeed he was very right.”

Uncle Joe stood up and assured them, “You all get top marks for today. I can't wait to see you again two weeks from now for our next discussion. Now, let's go for our walk through the forest.”

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Whispering Pines

As arranged, two weeks later they returned to Uncle Joe's cabin early on a Saturday morning to find him splitting firewood while he waited for them. His dog Moe was excited to hear them approach and after barking briefly he recognized them, and raced down the path to greet them; licking their fingers and wagging his tail. Uncle Joe didn't have too many visitors, so Moe was delighted to see them again.

After welcoming them, Uncle Joe commented that, "There is no sense wasting time so let's head off to the giant white pines further down the lake."

With that Uncle Joe led the way on a narrow, but much used wilderness trail which passed through the woods along the western side of Little Twin Lake. Uncle Joe had told Teda, Colmac and Thegar that less than a kilometre down the lake they would find a group of giant white pines which had survived the harvesting of the past 150-years.

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When they stopped at the foot of the first white pine, all three children were clearly impressed with the majestic nature of the stand of trees. Thegar was quick to exclaim, “You are right Uncle Joe; we have not seen anything like this on other parts of the Limberlost property. In fact, the trees are larger and more beautiful than the white pines and hemlock trees in the Temagami forests.”

Teda chimed in, “Besides, their beauty and amazing size, listen to the sound of the wind as it blows through their branches.”

Uncle Joe responded, “There is good reason for people referring to these great trees as whispering pines. If you listen carefully, it is not that difficult to hear faint voices. In fact, the early inhabitants of this region would visit spots like this along the shores of a lake where fresh breezes blow when they were troubled and sought guidance from their ancestors.”

“Now let me tell you some of the things I have come to learn about these amazing trees. I’ve been trying to sift through the information I have collected on them during the past week and concluded I should restrict my comments to the ten most important features of this great tree.”

“First, the white pine, which is known as the eastern or northern pine, is the official tree of Ontario. It is the largest conifer in the northeastern United States and Canada, with the tallest in the Algonquin region soaring to 150-feet.”

“Second, lumber made from the eastern white pine has long been recognized for its special qualities and multitude

of uses. They were reserved in Colonial times for the Royal Navy for use as ship masts. To this day, the title deeds of northern Ontario properties entitle British navel officers to harvest white pine, even on private lands.”

“Third, according to legend, after many years of bloodshed, the First Nations in the Algonquin region buried their weapons under a giant white pine. The trees roots stretching in all directions represented unity in a previously troubled land, and with its crown seen for miles, it was considered an enduring symbol of peace. White pine, instead of having one large vertical anchoring root, has five to ten which extend radially to form a star pattern.”

“Fourth, typically a white pine will grow in size for about 200-years and then live for as long as 500-years. You can find one very tall white pine on the shores of Lake Solitaire. It has a girth of at least 12-feet and is probably well over 150-years old.”

“Fifth, the great attraction and value of lumber produced from the eastern white pine unfortunately reduced its ranking from between 15% to 20% of Ontario’s forests in the 1850s to less than 3% today. Being a softwood, it could be harvested by early lumber merchants, and easily moved to market using the lakes and rivers, prior to roads being built.”

“Softwoods float well in water, whereas hardwoods such as maple and beech have a tendency to sink. These particular trees were probably spared, because the passage between Little Twin Lake and Twin Lake was too narrow

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and shallow to float them through. Therefore, there was no easy way to get them out.”

“Sixth, the eastern white pine is the only five-needle conifer native to this part of the continent. The needles are 2” to 5” long and are usually shed at the end of their second year’s growth, and seldom stay on the tree beyond the fourth year.”

“Seventh, seed cones produced by the white pine vary from four inches to seven inches long and unlike other conifers do not need the extreme heat of a forest fire to open. Exposed to the sun, the seeds are released and coast to the ground but will only grow if they find their way to bare soil, which gets plenty of sunlight. The trees start producing seed cones after 20 years which reoccur every three to five years.”

“Eighth, white pines produce the most valuable softwood lumber in eastern Canada. The heartwood is excellent for doors, moldings and cabinet work.”

“Ninth, the white pine grows best in moist sandy-loamy soils, usually mixed with other species and thrives best along the shores of lakes where they receive bright sunlight. The older thick barked trees can survive most fires and therefore provide a fresh seed supply for new stands after a fire.”

“Tenth, black bears favour the white pine as it provides a sanctuary for their cubs, because its rough, craggy bark is easy for them to climb and its spreading branches provide ample support to nest. Therefore, be careful when

venturing around white pine trees in the early spring. Teda, I see you are wearing bells on your boots, which should serve the purpose of warning the mother bear at least to reveal herself or remove her young from the tree before you approach.”

Uncle Joe, sitting down on the trunk of a fallen tree, said, “Well, those are some of the key facts that I know about the white pine. I could go on further, but I think that is a fair amount of information to record in our nature book. Teda, I saw you making notes. Once you have written them up, I would be pleased to fill in some of the gaps that I did not cover in my ramblings.”

Colmac was quick to exclaim, “That was hardly a ramble – it came across as a very coherent lecture – one, two, three, etcetera. I know I am going to look forward to reading Teda’s notes.”

Thegar also thanked Uncle Joe, and asked, “There seems to be a lot of different types of pine trees. Are they related, and is the larch also a pine tree?”

“Yes, they are related,” said Uncle Joe. “You have red pine, jack pine, scotch pine, Austrian pine and indeed others, but the white pine, in my mind, is the king of the pines. The Group of Seven artists made it famous and for good reason. Just listen to the whispering of the wind, think of the quality of the wood and the trees sheer beauty and size. The larch is also a pine, but because it loses all its needles each year, it is a deciduous tree. The larch, by the way, is also known in many parts of the country as tamarack.”

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Colmac responded, “Information like that is going to help us immensely when we take visitors on walking tours of Limberlost. We can make it much more interesting for them, just as you have made it for us today. Thank you once again, Uncle Joe.”

“Well,” said Uncle Joe, “Here is some additional information on the members or associates of the Group of Seven, whose work helped conservation efforts throughout Canada – Tom Thomson in Algonquin Park, A.Y. Jackson in Georgian Bay, Lawren Harris in Northern Superior and Emily Carr in Coastal British Columbia. Uncle Ted tells me that your family has an attractive collection of Canadian landscape paintings, which I hope I will have an opportunity to see one day.”

Uncle Joe then stood up and said, “Well, I guess we should be getting back because you don’t want to be too late and having to explain what you are up to at this early stage of our adventure together. Next week, lets meet where the creek used to flow out of Helve Lake, running southward into the Kalonga Valley. I would like to explore some of the more interesting areas of the valley with you. I have noticed in recent years that you cut a rough trail along the northern shore, and therefore we will have a lot to share with each other; particularly the life and role of the beavers who populate the area.”

“Thegar, since you mentioned during our walk that you have studied beavers in school, perhaps you could come prepared with five important aspects of their role in

the northern wilderness and I will do likewise. I was thinking that this is probably a good format for our talks, with each of us taking a turn at helping to prepare and lead a discussion.”

All three children, feeling much richer for the experience, thanked Uncle Joe profusely for a wonderful and rewarding visit, and then departed cheerfully in their canoe.

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Beaver Tales

The week seemed to fly by as Teda, Colmac and Thegar eagerly looked forward with anticipation to re-visiting Uncle Joe, and once again be enchanted by his knowledge of the wilderness and having the opportunity to benefit from his experiences.

They had only needed a couple of visits to build a deep trust and confidence in Uncle Joe and to value his great understanding of nature. He in turn found their enthusiasm and insatiable quest for information exhilarating. Like them, he anxiously looked forward to the next time they would meet from the moment they disappeared from sight in their canoe.

This visit was to be the first time they would meet away from Uncle Joe's cabin, requiring him to rise early and walk through the woods up to Helve Lake and then along the old stream bed, which a long time ago flowed

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water from Helve Lake into the Kalonga Valley. Although it took Uncle Joe a good forty-five minutes to reach the area where they had agreed to meet, he arrived at least a half hour ahead of schedule.

He had purposely moved through the woods very quietly to avoid disturbing the animals as he hoped to spend the time while he waited observing the wild life. Finding a large fallen tree trunk to rest his back against, he quietly broke off a few fresh Hemlock branches and placed them in front of himself to hide his presence.

While he contemplated the most important characteristics of beavers, the topic they had agreed to discuss this day, as well as their role in nature, he also wondered how much preparation Thegar would have done. He very much hoped that Thegar had prepared properly as he did not want him to fall short, especially in the eyes of Teda and Colmac.

It was his objective to see them all succeed, as they had quickly become his hope for the future conservation of the local area and beyond. He also needed the energetic skills of youth to help him record and pass on much of the knowledge he had gathered over many years. On reflection, he realized he had been searching for some time for worthy custodians who were interested in protecting his life's work.

It was not long before he was distracted by a couple of deer and a lone moose venturing down into the large beaver meadow to graze. For Uncle Joe, it was already a wonderful day.

Virtually right at the agreed time, the old battered Jeep came rattling down the steep hill towards the gully where Uncle Joe waited. As Teda, Colmac and Thegar left the Jeep, Uncle Joe called out in a welcoming voice and started descending the side of the hill where he had been observing the morning's activity.

Uncle Joe immediately suggested, "Let's walk west down the Kalonga Valley to Lake Solitaire and examine some of the more interesting sights. This is a very precious valley as it is the head waters for Lake Solitaire, which feeds Clear Lake, which in turn feeds Turtle Lake on the Limberlost property, and to the north, Rebecca and Bella Lakes. Knowing this, you should understand why your neighbours to the north are so delighted with the care the Limberlost Forest & Wildlife Reserve is now receiving. This was not always the case when developers got their hands on the property and won approval to construct two-thousand condominium units. Thankfully they never proceeded with this plan."

The four of them walked together for fifteen minutes chatting about the weather, school and other topical subjects, before Uncle Joe directed the conversation to the business at hand by declaring, "This portion of the valley is particularly interesting, as not so many years ago it was flooded. In fact, many of the government maps show it as a fair-sized lake; however, personally, I like it better this way as it is truly a haven for the larger animals to feed. The deer like the grass and the moose like to graze standing in the wet areas, which run down the center of the valley. You can

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always be certain of seeing wildlife if you arrive early and sit quietly for ten minutes or so. I suggest we do this later when we are further down the valley near one of the largest beaver meadows.”

Uncle Joe then turned to Thegar and asked, “Why don’t you start telling us about what you have managed to learn, or better still, what you have observed personally from visiting their dams?”

Thegar began by summarizing what he intended to cover. “I thought I would explain how beavers build their lodges; what they eat; their positive role in nature, as well as the damage they often do; who their natural enemies are; and their abilities to defend themselves. These are the five aspects of beavers that I found most fascinating, but I am sure you have many others that we would enjoy hearing about.”

Thegar knew that his commentary should be well organized and made interesting for everyone, and had decided this could best be done by following the numerical format used by Uncle Joe on their last visit. By this point, they had reached a large and active beaver dam at the end of the first significant meadow where the Canadian Shield protruded five feet or more above of the surrounding ground.

Thegar suggested they sit down and take a rest on the smooth rocks along the shore that had been warmed by the sun. This would also give Teda an opportunity to prepare herself to record the information he had gathered on beavers and their role in the northern wilderness.

“First,” started Thegar, “Beavers are rodents. Who would have thought a country would chose a rodent as its national animal? Well, it was the great demand by European’s for beaver hats in the seventeen and eighteen hundreds, which made beavers Canada’s most significant natural resource. In fact, at one time beaver pelts were the main unit of currency in this country, like shells were to Caribbean islanders. Their exploitation had been so successful that by 1893 when Algonquin Park was established, the beaver population had been reduced to less than 10% of its previous levels.

“I hope that is enough on history,” said Thegar. “Now moving on to my second point, which is how beavers live. We all know they build their dams and lodges with sticks, mud and even rocks; sometimes 50-metres or more long, two metres high and between three and five metres wide at their base. Recently, a satellite photo drew two curators for the Royal Ontario Museum to venture into northern Saskatchewan to discover a 25-kilometre beaver dam wall; by far the longest dam found to date.”

Thegar continued, “Even more interesting, is the nature of the inside of their lodges. Each lodge has two or more tunnels, which serve as an entrance and escape passages, excavated under water through the mud to make it difficult for other animals to trespass. There are always spaces at the top of the lodge roof to allow fresh air to pass through what is often otherwise a solid mud roof. The beavers will abandon a lodge when it becomes infested with fleas or if the water level is insufficient to prevent freezing

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at the bottom of their pond. It is on the floor of the dam where they store their food for the winter – green sticks, bark and leaves. At the Algonquin Park visitors centre, I saw a full scale beaver lodge with a cut away section that allows you to examine the different chambers created for feeding and dry areas to nest.”

“Now for my third point, I will move on to a beaver’s primary role in nature.” Thegar continued, “Indians viewed the beaver as the sacred centre of the land, because they created the environment necessary for many other animals, birds and insects to breed and survive.”

“By flooding streams, beavers create reservoirs of water and then much later, when they abandon their dams, they leave behind rich meadows and wetlands which also have a very important part to play in a balanced eco-system.”

“Wetlands absorb much of the surface water run-off in the spring and then slowly release it in the dry season. This reduces flooding and helps to recharge underground aquifers. They also enhance water quality by trapping sediments and other contaminants.”

“My fourth point deals with the beaver itself. A beaver’s legs are short and as a result they are not able to move quickly on land. This makes them easy prey for their enemies when they are in the open, and therefore to be safe they must keep close to water. Beavers will often dig tunnels into the land and use them to return quickly to their ponds.”

“They are, however, very strong swimmers and with their hind feet being webbed, they can move swiftly through the water. Their tails are flat and up to 20-inches long, and are covered in scales. They store fat in their tails to draw on during the winter, and in the summer, their tails act as radiators to release excess heat from their fur-clad bodies. If an enemy approaches their lodge, a beaver will slap its tail on the water to warn other beavers of the danger. The beaver’s enemies include wolves, coyotes, bears, wolverine, lynx and other similar animals.”

“Finally, I was going to talk about the harm beavers can do to a property. If you are a farmer, beavers damming up a stream can flood your farmland, damaging your crops. If you have landscaped your property with costly trees, finding them cut down in the morning would surely make you angry. Similarly, flooded roads and road washouts don’t endear travelers to the beavers. So, it is obviously sometimes necessary to control their activities. I know from firsthand experience, trying to take their dams apart does not work as they rapidly rebuild them during the night. I understand the Echo Valley Group tried to solve the problem by dynamiting the McReynold’s beaver dam when it prevented the normal water flow to their property.”

Uncle Joe interjected, “That seldom works either. Another family of beavers will eventually be attracted to the sound of running water and build a new dam. Trapping works, but you have to re-visit the site every three years or so.”

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Continuing, Uncle Joe said, “As you know, trapping has been my family’s vocation for more than a hundred years. In time, you get to know all the potential dam sites, the size of the beaver population and where depleting food supplies will lead to migration to new sites. You see nature takes care of itself in the long run, since once the supply of poplars, birch and willows within 70 metres of their pond is depleted, they have no choice but to move on, leaving behind the beautiful meadows Thegar talked about. In 10 to 20 years, new tree growth allows the cycle to begin again.”

Uncle Joe hesitated for a moment and then said, “I will tell you about my own system which I have perfected over the years to fool beavers when property owners are desperate to stop them flooding their land. I take a long length of polyethylene pipe, poke it through the dam wall, or even lay it over the top, perforate ten feet of one end, and sink it into the deepest section of the pond by attaching it to a cinder block with about two feet of rope so that it floats above the bottom of the pond. The other end of the pipe is run down stream and covered with rocks. In this way, I drain their pond to the desired level, leaving sufficient water, which is essential for their food storage and safety; just as Thegar mentioned.”

Teda, who prided herself in her grasp of engineering challenges, and in fact was about to enter Princeton University to study engineering, said, “Uncle Joe, that is ingenious. Why doesn’t everyone do that?”

“I don’t tell anyone else about it for a few very good

reasons,” replied Uncle Joe. “First, since I’ve retired I have made a good living from looking after other peoples’ wild-life problems. Second, it would be the end of the beaver and all the good things Thegar mentioned they do. Others have, however, tried to do what I do, but they don’t perforate the pipe and position it a few feet above the floor of the pond. It therefore either becomes blocked by the beavers, as they are attracted to the sound of flowing water, or by leaves and other debris on the bottom of the pond that clog the perforations in the drain pipe.”

“Uncle Joe, you are truly amazing,” exclaimed Teda. “You solve peoples’ problems and make money at it, while keeping the interests of nature in mind. Why has no one found out what you do?”

“What I did not mention is, I tell the land owners not to venture near the dam while I am doing my thing, because it could be dangerous for them. By the time I tell them they can return, I have removed the pipe and made a meaningful hole in the dam wall to confuse them. Then I toss a few mothballs into the dry part of the lodge and no other beaver family is likely to move in for a long while.”

“Thegar, I am sorry I interrupted you, but I thought I should dissuade you from ever using dynamite, and in the process I went off on a tangent. Well, you were going to leave me a few points to make about beavers, however, in thinking about it, you have provided a very comprehensive presentation, and in fact, each of your five points covered more than one topic.”

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Uncle Joe concluded the discussion with, “Perhaps we can leave the subject of beavers and continue our walk down the valley where we can examine some of the more interesting aspects of the terrain and evidence of early settlers. It would be a shame to come this far down the Kalonga Valley without finding and discussing these matters.”

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Living Wetlands

As Uncle Joe stood up, he beckoned to them to look more closely at the large rocks closest to the northern bank of the beaver pond. They had been heavily chipped along a couple of narrow quartz veins.

Uncle Joe explained that during the Second World War, geologists poured over the area searching for signs of minerals to support Canada's war effort.

Pointing to a particularly heavily chipped area, Uncle Joe said, "This is one area where there is clear evidence of ore samples having been removed, presumably to take them away and check them at an assay lab. Much of the trenching we talked about earlier was also done during this period by the exploration teams."

Uncle Joe looked across to the other side of the valley and said, "Now look over at the south bank of the beaver pond – you will see a five foot high rock outcrop with a

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lone tree growing in the middle of it. That is a Limber Pine tree. By all accounts, it does not belong in this part of the country.”

The children looked and were impressed with the unique tree, while Uncle Joe continued, “It is called a Limber Pine because its branches and twigs are extremely flexible and can actually be tied in knots without breaking. They normally grow in rock crevices and exposed ridges in the southern Canadian Rockies and in the western United States.”

Pointing across the beaver pond again, Uncle Joe said, “That tree, or another one like it, was discovered on the property by a naturalist nearly one hundred years ago. His name was John Simmons, and you may have read some of his poetry, including a poem about the Limber Tree and how it was lost and far away from its natural home.”

“Sometime thereafter, this area and the roads leading to it became known as the Limber Lost Pine Property. Not too many people know this history. I have kept it to myself, because I saw no sense making it a tourist attraction with each visitor plucking off a branch to see how far it could be bent without breaking.”

Teda immediately replied, “We had no idea where the name came from. We have often wondered and asked questions, but everyone we’ve asked has been unable to tell us. We will make sure we never tell anyone where the actual tree is.”

Colmac interjected, “It is probably best we tell them

that the tree died many years ago. Uncle Joe, do you think you could find us a copy of the poem?”

Uncle Joe said, “I can do better than that. Like Thegar I enjoy poetry about the wilderness and recite verses to myself when I sit quietly alone in the woods. I think I can pretty much recall the *Limber Lost Pine* poem. It goes something like this:

*Limber, limber tree,
How did you appear?
You are far from your native home,
What are you doing here?*

*A great wind storm took a seed to the heavens,
Carrying it from the mountains in the west,
Floating far above the forests for days on end,
To descend to this haven to rest.*

*Limber, limber tree,
How did you get your name?
You're so different from your cousin pines,
Is it true your limbs are also not the same?*

*My family thrives up in the mountains,
Where the wind, sleet and snow abound,
Our limbs must bend and never snap,
If we are to remain healthy and sound.*

*Limber, limber tree,
You may be lost and far from your own,
But we will respect and always love you,
And are grateful that this is where you have grown.*

“Uncle Joe, that was great!” exclaimed Teda. “Would

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you recite it again but a little more slowly so that I can write it down? It definitely should be in our journal as it teaches us a lot about the Limber Pine and equally importantly why this property has such an unusual name.”

Uncle Joe proceeded to repeat his recitation of the *Limber Lost Pine* poem or at least a somewhat similar version of it. He then said to Teda, “Please feel free to improve on my version, should you wish. It is many years since I saw the original poem in print and I am sure I have substituted different words here and there. By the way, it is not unusual to find plants and even fish far away from their natural habitats. The Brent Crater in Algonquin Park has fish living in it, even through there are no rivers or streams flowing into the crater due to its high lip, which was created when the meteorite struck the earth. It is believed that birds transported fish eggs from a nearby watercourse, which could be the way a Limber Pine seed found its way here.”

They started to walk along the bank of the river, which flowed down the valley, and soon encountered three very large beech trees that had been chewed by beavers. In each case, more than half of the trunk had been gnawed away.

In pointing out the trees, Uncle Joe commented, “These are excellent examples of the beavers’ intelligence and patience. If they chewed all the way through there would have been a good chance of being crushed when the tree fell.”

“By chewing through more than half the trunk and leaving the tree for the wind to blow over, they don’t

expose themselves to this danger. Also, remember that the beavers teeth are always growing and they need to keep chewing to wear them down.”

Further down the trail, the Kalonga River flowed at a healthy pace over rocks for about a hundred metres making a very pleasing sound as the water cascaded with small waterfalls to the lower level of the valley.

Shortly after this they entered an area of intense beaver activity with fifty or more large trees having been brought down in a very haphazard manner. Uncle Joe commented, “This is unusual, particularly the size of the trees which have been destroyed. I probably should have noticed this earlier and been more aggressive in trapping this area.”

“Have you noticed the sweet smelly perfume? Beavers have glands that enable them to extrude this scent. They use it to mark their area, especially in the spring to let wandering beavers know that the pond is occupied and will be defended.”

Uncle Joe continued, “We seem to be back talking about beavers. Let’s walk very quietly for the next five minutes, by which time we should reach a series of dams and fresh beaver meadows. In total there are thirteen active dams or mature meadows in the Kalonga Valley. When we reach the first meadow, let’s find a spot to rest and hope that some wildlife make an appearance.”

Within ten minutes of sitting quietly, hidden on the banks of a large beaver meadow, a group of deer appeared walking confidently through a particularly heavily grassed

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area to drink from the stream. A few moments later a heron flew by, swooping down to pick up and gobble down an unwary young frog, undisturbed by a woodpecker merrily chipping away at a dead tree in search of bugs.

Uncle Joe, speaking in a hushed voice, said, “This is one of the benefits of the wetlands and meadows created by the beaver. The dead trees and fresh grass are ideal feeding and breeding grounds for a wide diversity of wildlife, including ducks, heron, otters, swamp sparrows and mice, which in turn attract owls.”

Colmac suggested, “We should talk about owls on one of our visits since they were adopted many years ago for the Limberlost logo. We saw two of them last week just after sunset on the Ascension Trail, and our Aunt Norma had one staying in her gazebo for or day or so, thriving on the prairie chickens she had been feeding around her cabin.”

“Interesting,” noted Uncle Joe, who then suggested, “Teda, why don’t you lead us in a discussion on owls next week, and I will try to make sure that Ollie, a domesticated owl, is around the cabin when you visit. I’ve hand fed Ollie virtually from the day she was born after her nest was destroyed in a wind storm and her mother abandoned her.”

“Uncle Joe, you are full of surprises. I can’t wait to meet Ollie!” exclaimed Teda. “In the meanwhile, Thegar, why don’t you look for your old nature journals. I remember that the journal which won the Premier’s Nature Award had a section on the Limberlost Owls.”

Turning to Uncle Joe, Teda asked, “If Thegar’s study

on owls is as good as I recall, would you mind if we include it in our journal? Thegar wrote and illustrated his nature journals five years ago when he was nine years of age. His teacher was so impressed that, unknown to Thegar, she entered his journal in the Premier's Nature Award competition."

"Thegar's work was recognized as being among the best for students of his age group, resulting in him receiving a congratulatory letter from the Premier of Ontario, and a beautiful hand-carved drake Mallard, which are among his most prized possessions."

Uncle Joe immediately responded, "Of course I wouldn't mind. That is exactly the type of thing we want to capture in the journal. Let's include the best of all of our knowledge and work and aim to keep on improving and adding to it."

"It has been another long day for you Uncle Joe, but this time we have a surprise which should please you," said Colmac. "We did not think you would want to walk all the way back up the Kalonga Valley, so Thegar and I moored our dinghy at the foot bridge which goes over the Kalonga River, close to Lake Solitaire. We will use it to take you to the Waters Edge cabin and borrow our mother's car to drive you back to the south end of Little Twin Lake."

"That is very thoughtful of you Colmac," said Uncle Joe. "My legs are not as strong as they used to be, but I do know the day I stop using them, my time will soon be over. Don't ever forget this when you start to get older."

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When they came to say good-bye, they left each other with wonderful images of wildlife and interesting conversations that would keep all of their minds occupied for days to come.

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Ollie The Owl

The following week, in order to speed up their canoe trip across Buck Lake on their way to Uncle Joe's cabin on Little Twin Lake, Thegar loaded the small battery-driven fishing motor into the Jeep. He had calculated that by using the motor for the first part of their trip they could reduce the time it took to cross Buck Lake by a good twenty to thirty minutes, including the return trip. This would give them more time to spend with Uncle Joe.

Teda had brought along Thegar's old nature journals and had done her homework thoroughly on the types of owls which lived on the Limberlost Forest & Wildlife Reserve. Her mind, however, was clearly focussed on meeting Ollie, Uncle Joe's pet owl.

Many years ago, their mother had read them the children's classic *Owls in the Family* written by Farley Mowat about two owls, Wol and Weeps, who became pets of a

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Saskatchewan family. Teda had always wondered whether it was really possible for owls to be domesticated.

Having re-read the story, Teda made a point of bringing along freshly cooked strips of beef. Thegar, in turn, had actually caught two field mice which he kept alive in a plastic container with ample holes for fresh air.

When they arrived at Uncle Joe's cabin, he was ready for them, knowing exactly what they wanted to see first. They had hardly finished their greetings when Uncle Joe cupped his hands to his mouth and let out a loud *who-hoo-hoo-hoo* sound. He did this three or four times before a large owl came flying through the trees to settle on a branch only ten feet in front of him, just to the side of a rustic camp table.

Thegar immediately recognized it was a Great-Horned Owl, the same type of owl that adorned the Limberlost logo.

"Wow! That is the largest owl I have ever seen!" exclaimed Thegar. "I had read that the Great-Horned Owl could grow as tall as two feet, but did not believe it. The largest owl I have seen was probably only 15" to 18" tall. You must have been feeding Ollie steroids for her to grow so large. By the way, we have brought fresh meat and two live mice we caught outside our cottage."

Uncle Joe replied, "I am a little wary about live mice, because you never know whether they have ingested the type of poison most people lay out around their cottages. Let's feed her the meat, but keep the supply out of Ollie's

sight because her table manners are not the best.”

When Thegar opened the plastic bag for Uncle Joe to peer inside to inspect the strips of meat, Ollie, suspecting that they had brought treats for her, hopped down and waddled across the table.

Uncle Joe showed Thegar how to hold his hand flat with his palm upwards and his fingers close together. With his back to Ollie, Uncle Joe placed two strips of meat on Thegar’s palm and said, “It’s now O.K. to slowly move your hand forward towards Ollie. Let’s see if she’s in the mood to behave properly.”

Ollie hopped eagerly to the edge of the table and gently pecked the meat from Thegar’s hand. When she opened her mouth to swallow the strips of meat, it became clear how her hooked beak could be used to readily tear apart rabbits and large birds. Her talons were at least three-inches long and very sharp and also capable of doing a lot of damage to her prey or used to ward off intruders.

Meanwhile, Teda was rapidly scribbling notes ... *large head ... large yellow, forward-directed eyes ... whitish eyebrows and chest ... wide spaced black tufts of feathers for ears ... wings brown with black bars and spotted with grayish brown ...*

Uncle Joe interrupted Teda to ask her if she had found Thegar’s nature journal. He said, “I have been waiting to see his description of owls in the journal he wrote five years ago. If you have it with you, why doesn’t Thegar read it to us?”

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Thegar stood up, straightened his cap, opened the journal towards its middle, and slowly read:

This being my first Journal entry on birds, I decided it deserved a special bird. The Owl is my chosen bird because of Limberlost's Owl logo.

I saw my first Owl at Limberlost while walking home from a hike through the forest with my mother. Near the end of our outing, I left her to take a short-cut that follows the shore line. Whenever I walk on our trails, I usually pick up sticks to keep the path clear so that one day it will be possible to ride my bike on it.

That is just a dream, but I am told that dreams come true if you work at them. I was considering how high I would be on my bike to make sure I broke off all the low hanging branches. When I looked ahead, down the path I saw a figure move in the distance, so I slowly walked closer. There it was, the Long-Horned Owl. I recognized it by its long feathery ears.

It was mostly brown and partly white. It stared at me for a full two minutes and then flew away deeper into the forest. I was stunned at the wing span. It looked like it was nearly three feet wide!

I tried to follow, but it seemed like it was moving at the speed of light. In addition, the colours of the Owl's feathers blended in with the trunks and branches of the trees.

I am very pleased however that owls are still living and doing well in the Limberlost forest."

“Thegar that must have been a wonderful experience and you have captured it extremely well in your journal

entry,” said Uncle Joe. “Do you mind if I borrow your journal to read the rest of your entries? I will return it on our next visit.”

Thegar responded, “Not at all Uncle Joe, but you must remember that I was only learning how to write at the time. I was slow to learn to read and write, mainly because I preferred to do other things like exploring in the woods, riding my bike and swimming.”

Meanwhile, Ollie suspected that there were more treats in the plastic bag and had waddled closer to Uncle Joe and began pecking at the bag. This required Uncle Joe to crunch up the bag and put it in his pocket in order to satisfy Ollie’s curiosity. Then, in response to a clap of his hands, Ollie flew to the low branch to the left of the camp table and appeared to sulk as she closed her large eyes.

Turning to Teda, Uncle Joe asked her, “What can you add about owls to Thegar’s journal entry?”

Teda replied, “Not much of importance in comparison to hearing about how you came to have Ollie as a friend. I am sure we would all far rather record this in our journal, as well as knowing how you trained her to respond to your calls and claps of your hands. Uncle Joe, would you tell us more?”

Pausing for a moment, Uncle Joe responded, “Well, two years ago I was walking on what was then known as the Carter property, which was one of the last pieces to become part of the Limberlost Forest & Wildlife Reserve. It was there that I came across Ollie sitting in the pathway,

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making hissing noises as I approached.”

“I looked around and could find no sign of a nest, which are usually set on rocky ledges, and soon came to the conclusion that it was highly unlikely that her mother would return. Just in case I was wrong, I hid myself for half an hour, but there was no sign of her being rescued. Since she was only four or five inches high, I placed her in my knapsack and in no time she had learnt to gobble up the meat I gave her from a sandwich. From this I knew she was healthy but a long way from learning to fly, and consequently I felt that if I left her on her own she would be devoured by a fox or some other animal.”

“I allowed Ollie to stay in the cabin at first but this was probably a mistake, because when I did let her go outside after a couple of months, she was content to follow me around, walking on the ground. At three months she was pretty much grown up and still would not fly. When I placed her in a tree, she would return to the ground by using her claws and beak to climb down. Eventually, I had to climb on the roof of the cabin and launch her into the air three or four times before she found out what her wings could do.”

“Ollie was also lazy at first in hunting for her own food. As a result, I had to starve her for a while and start releasing small animals under her nose. I guess under her beak is more correct. By the time Ollie was six months old she was able to fend for herself, however she still seems to enjoy my company and I obviously enjoy hers.”

“Uncle Joe,” Teda said, “You have so many amazing stories and things which have happened in your life. I hope you do not mind if we take a few photos of you and Ollie together before we leave?”

After Teda had taken a number of photographs of the two of them, she said, “The only other relevant points of interest I can add on the subject of owls are first, owls are generally nocturnal, using their exceptional hearing, which is the best among birds, and their extraordinary vision to hunt. As a result they are seldom observed by people. Their wide wing spans, and soft fluffy bodies allow them to fly very quietly.”

“Second, there are eighteen species of owls in North America.” Teda continued, “None of these pose a threat to humans, although they will vigorously defend their nesting areas and young against intruders. Unfortunately, superstitions and misconceptions about owls have caused them to be viewed with suspicion.”

Uncle Joe and the three children then talked at length about other birds with Thegar drawing extensively from his earlier journal, including reading out loud his very first entry which dealt with bird watching:

“Birds are the most readily observable form of wild life, but best watched if you remain perfectly still. You can spend a lifetime and yet there will still be new species to discover. Their colours can be blinding and their chirps can sooth the most jangled nerves.”

In setting the agenda for their next meeting, Uncle

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Joe suggested, “Let’s explore the Carter property, where Ollie was born. I will show you the places where we eventually bested the worst gang of poachers who intruded on the property. Overall, it was a lot of fun, at least for me. Perhaps you will enjoy my poaching tales as much as I like telling them. Therefore, no homework is needed for next week, and in the meanwhile I will be looking forward to seeing you again. We should meet at this spot and remember to bring the old Jeep with the large wheels. You should also ask Ted to check the winch, as the roads on the Carter property are pretty rough and I am sure we will need to pull ourselves out of a mud hole at some point during the day.”

With that, Teda, Colmac and Thegar happily waved goodbye and paddled northward through Little Twin Lake to return via Poverty Lake to Buck Lake.

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Poacher Pursuits

The following Saturday morning, Teda, Colmac and Thegar arrived at the south end of Little Twin Lake at 8:00 a.m. to find Uncle Joe sitting on a fallen log, with his dog Moe at his feet.

Uncle Joe stood up slowly and called out, “Good morning! I hope you are looking forward to making this a working expedition, as it has been quite a while since I last spent any time on the Carter property. As I mentioned before, the northern portion has always been a haven for poachers; and needs careful watching, especially at this time of the year. Who’s driving?”

“I am Uncle Joe!” replied Colmac. “You tell us where you want us to go. I have a topographical map with me, but it does not show any roads past the Long Lake cabin.”

Uncle Joe spread the map out on the hood of the Jeep and slowly ran his finger southwesterly across the map to

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Burn's Lake.

“Colmac, head up the road from the Long Lake cabin, and then we will try to use the logging roads to travel as far as we can to the Burns Lake cabin. We will likely have to walk a good four to five-kilometres further.”

After the Jeep became stuck for the third time, requiring them to use the winch to get out of the mud holes, they agreed it was now best to continue on foot. An hour later they reached the rustic Burns Lake hunting cabin, which was built with cedar wood and had small shuttered windows and a stone fireplace.

Uncle Joe started to explain, “Your family rents this cabin each year to the previous owners’ of this land, who return every year for the deer hunting season in November. It was part of the deal when the land was purchased. Unfortunately, during the balance of the year, poachers often use it to rest up for an afternoon or spend a night. In the past they came in along the Millar Hill concession line, but your Uncle Ted has stopped that by installing gates and deeply rutting the logging roads.”

Uncle Joe chuckled as he reflected, “I helped him do that a year or so ago. A group of poachers had driven in from the west side from Millar Hill. I was out inspecting some trap lines when I noticed their truck and quickly headed back to suggest to Ted that he return with his large tractor, which he promptly did. We then used the enormous rear wheels to create deep ruts in the logging road in two separate places that were flanked by rock outcrops and far

from any large trees that the poachers could use to attach winch lines. The ground was very muddy and therefore the conditions were perfect for gouging deep ruts into the roads. The bottom of the ruts were at least fifteen-inches below the grassy centre strip, making it virtually impossible for a normal vehicle to get through.”

“It worked perfectly, as I found out later in the week from a friend of Ted’s in Dwight who operates a towing service. Ted had tipped him off that he should expect a call, and that he should tell them that the cost would be \$750 to \$1,000 for working in this area because of the soil conditions and the need to pay a mythical fee to access the Limberlost lands. They had no choice, but to pay up. This is what we call gentle persuasion.”

“If you try to take the poachers head on, they will never respect you and will come back and damage your property. You have to be a little more subtle and make their visits decidedly unpleasant, hoping that they will find better places to go. When Bob Meakeron called in the police and had two poachers arrested on his property, they got six-month jail sentences and lost their vehicles and other equipment. The very same week that the poachers were released from jail, Meakeron’s cottage burnt to the ground.”

Sitting comfortably around the Burns Lake cabin table with a fire burning in the hearth, Thegar was eager to hear more. “Uncle Joe, you said you had to get their respect but you had to be subtle about it. Tell us more about what that means? Tell us some of the other things you have done to

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get rid of poachers without taking them head on.”

“O.K. Let’s see,” started Uncle Joe, then paused to reflect, “On this particular part of the property I have smoked them out, sugared their ATV’s and made a vehicle disappear. I will explain each of these in turn, but please think of them as being done for a good cause, namely to dissuade the poachers from trespassing again with the intent of illegally killing the wild life. Don’t forget, they are thieves, but unfortunately are largely beyond the law since there are very few conservation officers to police the north.”

“First,” continued Uncle Joe, “The smoke-out was a lot of fun. They had shot a raccoon for no real purpose, and left its body lying on the forest floor. When I came across it, I decided to wait until nightfall and then stuff it down the chimney of this very cabin. Their fire was still burning and therefore after about ten minutes they came rushing out into the night, choking and cursing. I sat up on that hill also choking, but with laughter. They never did find out what was blocking the fire place. They packed up and left the next morning.”

“By the time they next returned, I had removed the raccoon, and again I waited until late in the night before creeping into the cabin to collect as much of their ammunition as possible. They had spent the night drinking and were too fast asleep to hear me. I then spent a couple of hours using a pair of pliers to remove the slugs from the cartridges and tamping out the gun powder, reassembling the ammunition, clamping it tight and replacing it in the

cabin before they woke up.”

Uncle Joe smiled as he remembered what happened the next day, “It was their custom to target practice in the morning, so I waited around to see what would happen. You would not believe the cursing and swearing. Again, they packed up and left. That was the last time I saw that group.”

“Over in Bauer Park, Ted tipped me off that he had seen a group enter off Limberlost Road on ATV’s. I knew exactly what to do to dissuade them from bringing ATV’s into the park. There is nothing worse than having an ATV stuck in the middle of a forest, especially if your buddies’ vehicles are stuck too. That night, each gas tank got a cup of sugar to boost its octane. Hardly so! Within ten or fifteen minutes of running their ATV motors they sputtered and conked out. Sugar makes an unholy mess of the carburetor and requires a lot of work and money to clean it out of the gas tank, fuel lines and cylinder head. That’s pretty bad in itself, but having to walk out and then return with four friends to help pull your ATV out of the forest, that is really bad and more than enough to spoil any friendship. They were also never seen together again in this area.”

“The toughest group I had to deal with came from Dorset. They were all heavily overweight and drank far too much. When I told them they were trespassing, one of them raised his gun and pointed it towards me. That made me really mad so I gave them the impression I was scared and immediately left. I kept up a constant watch for them

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and four weeks later they returned, but by this time I was ready to face them on my own terms. As I had previously observed, it was their custom to rise late in the morning after too much drinking the night before. When they eventually headed into the woods with their guns, I set to work.”

“They always left their vehicles at the top of a hill a mile or so from here in the middle of a stand of very large Hemlock. One truck was brand new and had a sturdy winch attached to it, which I used to hoist the vehicle fifty feet up into the largest tree. It was a bit tricky since I had to get it between a number of smaller branches on the way up, which thankfully provided fairly good camouflage. In any event, I gambled that people seldom look up when searching for something that is missing.”

“I later found out from a friend that one of the thugs considered himself a good tracker and was stunned to figure out that there were no tracks showing that their vehicle had been driven from the spot it had been parked. This spooked them so much that there is still talk in town about this section of the forest being haunted.”

“Now, Hemlock branches are very strong indeed, but not tough enough to hold a truck through the winter. The main branch bent and the winch wire sheared of the smaller branches, resulting in the truck crashing to the ground, smashing its suspension and shattering its windows. I had to get Ted to find it a new home. Don’t ask me where. He brought in his tractor and wagon and that was the end of it as far as I was concerned.”

“The reason they spooked so easily was that I had previously tried to scare them off by starting up their ATV’s and leaving them idling in the middle of the night. After doing this a number of times they became fairly agitated, not knowing how it was happening or who was out there watching them. This is usually enough to clear trespassers off the property, but these were bad dudes.”

Thegar, who was wide-eyed and listening intently, butted in to say, “Uncle Joe, you are truly amazing in how you deal with difficult situations. I certainly would not mess with you. I’ll bet you have quite a reputation. Uncle Ted did not tell us anything like that about you. I suspect he is much like you but does not want us to know. I like that, and I hope I can come out with you the next time you go teaching trespassers and especially poachers a lesson. Can I please?”

Uncle Joe answered, “We can do it right now. Let’s go and check for illegal trap lines around Jimmy Lake. It is just north of here. By the way, your Uncle Ted is a really good fellow, but he is never going to tell you his tales which are probably as many as mine. He says your father keeps reminding him to be friendly to everyone, as he wants Limberlost to be a peaceful place. Ted worries that your father would not exactly endorse some of the things he feels he must do to protect the property.”

Colmac asked, “Would you tell us on our walk to Jimmy Lake about some of Uncle Ted’s escapades? We promise to keep everything you say to ourselves. We prom-

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ise!”

“I certainly will,” replied Uncle Joe, “But let’s start our walk before it gets too late.”

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Wilderness Traps

Led by Moe, they left the cabin and headed north towards Jimmy Lake; otherwise known as Mud Lake, for it was shallow and best suited for moose and ducks.

Uncle Joe started the conversation with, “You asked me to tell you about some of Ted’s adventures with poachers, but we should find time to also talk about trapping and its history and ongoing role in this part of the country.”

“Starting with your Uncle Ted, have you ever wondered why the road past Helve Lake went up the hill only to jog around in such an unusual manner?”

Uncle Joe continued, “Well, Ted was determined one way or another to bring an end to the incursions from Millar Hill. Historically it has been the entry point for many of the poachers into this area. He had tried gating it, but they ran their trucks over his gate. When he used a solid steel gate and a thick chain to secure the lock, they sawed down the

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wooden gateposts. Then he cemented in steel posts. They in turn used oxy-acetylene torches to cut the gate into small pieces, which they had the nerve to stack neatly next to the gate posts!”

“When your Dad heard that there had been a stand-off with a shot gun pointed at Ted, he said enough was enough. Ted then persuaded your family to buy more land on either side of the road. Having done this, Ted bulldozed the existing road closed, which required anyone going to Twin or Burn’s Lake to enter through Limberlost’s northern entrance gate and pass right by his house.”

“In the process of extending the Helve Road, he used the rocks and other debris created along the way to cover the Millar Hill concession line where it crossed into Limberlost’s property over a distance of two hundred yards or more, making it virtually impossible to find out where the old road was.”

“This has definitely reduced the poaching problems. However, it could never have been achieved if Ted had not been so persistent and perhaps also somewhat mischievous, but always with absolute good intent.”

“Remember I said earlier there is an unwritten law of the bush regarding poachers? You must always bear this in mind when dealing with them. They think their guns make them invincible. This combined with the fact that they have no qualms about trespassing on other people’s land, stealing from them and hunting out of season, makes them very dangerous.”

“They also know how to get around the law, but they fall apart when there is uncertainty and particularly when they don’t know who or how many people are causing them problems. Therefore, it is best to keep out of sight, avoid confronting them directly, while always aiming to beat them at their own game. I believe if someone is stealing timber, killing wildlife or damaging property, they deserve to have their own property also being put at risk.”

Teda, who considered herself to have a well developed sense of fairness and justice, struggled with this logic, “Uncle Joe, doesn’t that sound like frontier justice? That is, take the law into your own hands because the sheriff is too weak or the judge is crooked?”

Teda’s question took Uncle Joe aback, leaving him initially at a loss for words. He did not want to dismiss Teda’s thoughts as being idealistic and therefore took his time before saying, “Teda, that is a very good question and something I have worried about from time to time. But, what should you do if the law and its application leave you and your property unprotected?”

“Property rights are fundamental to the well-being of our society. It is not so long ago that if you shot someone, you were not prosecuted as long as that person was trespassing on your property. We have come a long way since then. Today you must be defending yourself and your life has to be threatened.”

“Ideally, poachers would not exist; second, they would not trespass on private property; third, they would

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leave quietly when asked to; fourth, sufficient government officers would be available to prosecute them; fifth, poachers would accept their punishment honourable; and sixth, they would not seek retribution. Well, in all my history, working and living in the north, and having to contend with poachers, I can assure you that in virtually every instance, they have failed on all six counts.”

Teda listened intently to Uncle Joe’s explanation and instinctively suspected that the real world was perhaps a lot different from the one they studied in school, however, still feeling a little uncomfortable, she said, “Uncle Joe, you have given me a different perspective. I hope you don’t mind if we discuss this further when I have had a chance to think more about it.”

Uncle Joe responded reassuringly, “Teda, that is exactly what we are trying to achieve. We are searching for solid values which will survive the test of time. It is great that you are challenging me, as I know I still have a lot to learn; even about the things I have been most involved with.”

By that time, they were approaching the southern end of Jimmy Lake and passing by the beaver dams above the stream flowing out of the lake into Burns Lake. Uncle Joe located a sturdy stick and started poking it into the water near the dam wall searching for illegal trap lines. Eventually he found one and said, “I can either take it away and annoy the poacher or make it inoperable and frustrate him. This is the reason why I always carry a pair of pliers.

Look here: by breaking off this steel clip, should an animal set it off, they would be able to get free.”

In all, Uncle Joe located five trap lines during the next hour as they worked their way around the east side of the lake and circled back to their Jeep. With the completion of this work, Thegar commented, “I don’t think we would have found any of those trap lines. We have probably walked by many over the years, but I guess that is the secret to trapping – the lines have to be hidden from the animals and hence humans as well.”

Colmac had been intrigued by the various forms of traps and asked: “Uncle Joe, what type of trapping is approved? Uncle Ted said you and your family have had the trapping rights in this area for more than a century. What does that mean?”

“Well, trapping is highly regulated,” said Uncle Joe, “Which incidentally I support even though in general I do not believe in government interference with approved activities on privately owned property. Basically, I believe that people should be free to do what they want to do on their own lands. However, animals move freely from one piece of land to another and that poses a problem. The Ministry of Natural Resources does a good job in monitoring the animal populations in each district, and licensed trappers are expected to play an active role in assisting them with their animal and bird counts.”

“As professional trappers, we belong to well established associations and under the terms of our licenses,

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receive quotas for our designated areas. If we do not fulfill 75% of our quota, our licenses can be revoked or our future quotas reduced. The quotas are increased or decreased in order to control or promote the growth of specific species of animals.”

“For example, a number of years ago the wolf population declined significantly because of the spread of mange. As a result, a moratorium was placed on trapping wolves, which still stands today. In recent years, the wolf population has grown tremendously and no doubt will in time be needing some control, particularly in areas such as around Dwight and other nearby towns.”

“In fact, wolves deserve a further discussion as they are generally misunderstood. Since Thegar did the work on beavers and Teda spoke to us about Owls, Colmac, why don’t you think of preparing yourself to lead a discussion on wolves?”

Colmac responded positively, “Sure, I would like to do that, but next week could I persuade you to walk around Lake Solitaire? I will volunteer to be your guide and will talk about some of the more important lessons we have learned about trail building.”

Thegar interrupted, “Why don’t we do that? Colmac is very proud of his work on the Solitaire Trail, and afterwards you can come and join us for lunch at our cabin. It is probably time to meet our father and Aunt Mary. We have been telling them about you – nothing about the treasure – only how much you are teaching us about nature. I am sure

they would love to meet you.”

Uncle Joe eagerly accepted the invitation. “You know I don’t particularly like socializing, but it is only right that they know who you are spending so much time with. Time which I value highly and hope will continue. Teda, perhaps you could have the first ten sections or so of our journal in reasonable shape to show your father when I visit? I think that would help assure him that we are not wasting time.”

They returned to the landing at Little Twin Lake an hour or so earlier than they had expected, which led Thegar to suggest that Uncle Joe talk to them for a while longer about trapping. Thegar had been intrigued with how well the industry was organized and asked Uncle Joe to explain more.

Uncle Joe first sat down on the log where they met him earlier in the morning, but then stood up and walked towards his boat, beckoning them to follow him. “Let’s go back to my cabin where I can show you different types of traps and I also have a gift for you which was a little too heavy for me to carry alone. Unfortunately I only have three life jackets, so I hope Thegar that you don’t mind coming back to fetch Colmac?”

Colmac was about to protest that he could swim well and if they kept to the shoreline there shouldn’t be any problem with him accompanying them. Then on second thought, he agreed to wait, realizing that among the things Uncle Joe was trying to pass on to them was the importance of being constantly aware of safety risks. Colmac agreed

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to wait behind with Moe, who in any event would provide good company.

When they were all together at Uncle Joe's cabin, they decided to drink their coffee sitting around the large cabin table they had used on their previous visits. Outside, the black flies and mosquitoes were a greater nuisance than normal and they preferred not to be distracted by the constant buzzing around their ears.

Uncle Joe returned to the subject of trapping by explaining, "In many respects, trapping was this country's first as well as its second industry. It was essential to the indigenous people who used the animal skins to clothe and shelter themselves. The animals also provided food and the cords for their bows and trap lines."

"The European trappers developed such a thriving fur industry that the Hudson Bay Company opened up hundreds of stores across the country to trade basic staples for their furs. Unfortunately, like so many good things it was overdone. Thegar has already pointed out to us how the beaver population was decimated, all because the European's fell in love with beaver skin hats."

"Grey Owl, and I hope you have all heard about him, alerted the world to the damage that was being done. It does not matter that he was an imposter pretending to be an Iroquois, because he certainly was a great naturalist and paved the way for others to carry on his work. Thanks to his followers and the impact they had on the politicians, we have Algonquin Park and other nature reserves where the

animal population has had a chance to not only recover, but also to thrive. That is, assuming the poachers, and I include with them the hunters who hunt out of season, are kept under control.”

“The naturalists did a whole lot more. They also worked with the animal rights groups to persuade the legislators to set the rules for hunting and trapping and the type of traps which are permissible. If you come with me I will show you how today’s traps differ from those used fifty or so years ago, and some of those still being used by illegitimate trappers.”

Uncle Joe then led them to his storage shed and pulled out a number of illegal traps he had confiscated over the years and contrasted them with the padded humane traps he used. “A good trapper always tends to his traps each day. In fact, many jurisdictions and trapping associations require that traps must be inspected on a twenty-four hour rotation basis. Most poachers are week-end wonders, leaving the trapped animals in pain for days on end!”

The thought of a scared trapped beaver gnawing at its leg or being attacked by another animal was a little too much for Teda, leading her to ask Uncle Joe, “I hate to sound like a moralist, but please explain to us again why trapping is necessary?”

Uncle Joe had wondered from the beginning whether trapping was an appropriate subject for their journal, but felt that it would be dishonest to shield them from the realities of the northern wilderness. He now had to face the

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issue directly and he knew it would be very important for him to pass the test.

Taking a deep breath, which was his custom when he was uncomfortable or troubled, Uncle Joe said, “It was never an issue with our Indigenous people because they understood the land and the role of its varied inhabitants. Also, they would move on if the animal population became depleted in an area because of trapping, famine or disease, leaving it to recover over time on its own.”

“Unfortunately, when the villages and towns developed, the same reverence and respect for the land was lost with many of these people. I think town folk generally feel confined doing their factory, store or office jobs and for some reason the worst of them seem to feel they need to prove themselves in other ways. One way they do this is to take their guns or try to use trap lines to prove their mastery, at least in their own minds, over animals. In the process they perhaps assure themselves they can survive living off the land, and this somehow makes them feel better about themselves.”

“Whatever the reasons, we have a large number of human beings living in close proximity to wilderness areas and they inevitably inflict damage on the animal populations. The Ministry of Natural Resources, being short-staffed, can’t police everything, and therefore they enlist people like myself whose livelihood depends on a healthy wildlife balance in their designated areas. You would probably be surprised at how professional the licensed trappers

are, besides also being dedicated naturalist.”

“The professional trapper generally has an intricate knowledge of his designated area and speaks with pride about the health of the animals and the condition of the land. I guess I have still not answered your question, which was, why is trapping necessary?”

Uncle Joe continued, “Well a good example is, less than twenty kilometres away, the town of Dwight is slowly expanding northward, however, in recent months a number of cougars have been spotted near Echo Valley and a few house pets have disappeared. If this relationship is left unattended it could next be a child walking in the woods or playing in a backyard that disappears. In this case it is clearly appropriate to trap the cougars and relocate them further north in Algonquin Park. Unfortunately, with humans expanding their range, wildlife animals are losing part of their territory, which reinforces the role of nature reserves and the protection provided by private conservation areas, such as Limberlost.”

“I’ve previously explained the close relationship between the deer population and the wolves. My guess is an imbalance has arisen, which will in due course lead to the moratorium being lifted. Thegar talked about beavers, both the good things they do and the problems they can cause, especially when roads and fields are flooded.”

“I definitely don’t want to leave the impression that sharp shifts in policy and the quantity of trapping takes place from year to year. In fact, it is a delicate balance and

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the Ministry officials are caring people trying to do their best in interpreting the information they receive. I have found them to be very respectful of nature as well as the various naturalist groups.”

“I am also satisfied that most of us have the same goal – other than of course the illegal trappers and animal poachers we talked about this morning – and that is to protect the environment and the wildlife living in our areas. Teda, I hope that helps answer your question, but you should be assured we can return to it in the future, at any time you wish.”

“Thank you Uncle Joe,” replied Teda, “Again you have given me much to think about. It is a different perspective and it is another matter which I would like to talk more about once I have had a chance to think it through better.”

Welcoming the opportunity to leave the subject, Uncle Joe suggested, “Now come with me to the wood pile, I have a surprise for you. I used my small hand axe and a chainsaw to carve you a three-foot owl, nearly twice the size of Ollie. It is carved out of an old cedar log.”

“Wow!” exclaimed Colmac, “You’re an artist as well! It is absolutely perfect and this is for us?”

Uncle Joe immediately responded, “Of course, I think of it as a symbol of our friendship. We are searching for wisdom and it is said there is no wiser bird than an owl. Thegar has already mentioned that it is also the Limberlost symbol. I hope you and your family enjoy it. If you give it a

good coating of linseed oil you can leave it outside without any concerns about the wood deteriorating.”

And with that Uncle Joe helped them carry the log statue down to his boat and made two trips to return the three of them and the carving to their Jeep at the other end of Little Twin Lake. As they waved goodbye, they repeatedly called out their thanks for another exciting and highly educational day.

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Trail Blazing

It was two weeks before there was another chance for all of them to be together again. They had arranged to pick up Uncle Joe early on Saturday morning in the Jeep at the top of the Kalonga Valley near the Helve Fishing Cabin. This suited Uncle Joe as he had fallen behind in conducting his wildlife counts in that general area.

Thegar eagerly volunteered for the job as he had been looking for an opportunity to have time to talk to Uncle Joe alone. Colmac remained at Dragons Tongue to make preparations for the day, including transporting life jackets, gas and other gear to their boat for an early departure once Thegar returned with Uncle Joe.

They had decided to cross Lake Solitaire and commence the hike from the west side of the Lake at the point the Limberlost Forest & Wildlife Reserve joined Bauer Provincial Park. It was understood that one of them would

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later jog back around the lake at the end of the day to fetch the boat.

Uncle Joe was beaming when Thegar arrived. He'd had a very successful morning observing and counting the birds and animals in the valley. "Hi Thegar, you just missed a group of seven white tail deer less than fifty yards away from here. I also saw a black bear and her two cubs, plus a whole lot more."

Uncle Joe was hardly in the Jeep before Thegar started to pepper him with questions. "Good to see you again Uncle Joe. I wish I had been with you, but I am sure you needed it to be much quieter than I could have been. Uncle Joe, do you think I could learn to be a trapper and nature conservationist like you? Could I make a living at it? What do you think my father would say if I decided not to attend University and instead do what you do?"

The breath Uncle Joe took was even deeper than on the last few occasions when he was faced with tough questions from Teda. "Thegar, you must realize that you are extremely privileged to have the opportunity to study at virtually any university you chose, and it is essential that you set your mind on doing just that and doing it well. The more knowledge you have the better you will be able to contribute, no matter what you eventually decide to do. Use every moment you have while you're attending a university to learn as much as you possibly can."

"Remember also, the better educated you are, the greater the respect you will command, meaning you will

be able to accomplish more and do it a whole lot easier, because people will tend to listen to you. I hope that is enough on this subject. Your father undoubtedly would be disappointed and why would you allow that to happen? I would also be very disappointed.”

“Now for your question of whether you could become a trapper and nature conservationist. Of course you could, and it does not have to be at the expense of your education, or future business and family responsibilities. In fact, I think you are already a superb conservationist. There is very little we see together or talk about that you have not already thought through and formed some very sound opinions on.”

“I am happy to teach you all I know, but the truth is, I feel that the three of you are teaching me a whole lot as well. You are forcing me to rethink many issues. For example, look at the challenging questions Teda has posed. It is clear she thinks deeply before forming her opinions and that causes me to rethink many things which perhaps I have taken for granted.”

“Back to your question. Yes, I believe you would make a great trapper, conservationist and woodsman. Yes, you could make a good living at it, but unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, that is not your calling. You have a responsibility to do more. You have many talents and opportunities available to you, and we all have a fundamental duty to utilize our talents to the fullest and to seize the opportunities available to us. If you do otherwise, you will

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not be a very happy person.”

“You must prepare yourself to be an honourable, fair-minded and capable business person. This is how you will be able to protect what your family has accomplished so far, and be in a position to help them and others as well. To do that properly you should try to become a role model and encourage others to elevate themselves to a new level and a better life. I have no doubt you can do just that, and in the process you will derive great satisfaction from your accomplishments. I would be very upset with myself if I did anything to romanticize life in the wilderness and in the process caused you to rethink what you need to do for your family, yourself and all the people that are going to be counting on you.”

Thegar reflected for a moment. “Thank you Uncle Joe. You sure don’t leave much room for doubt when you express your views. I guess I had better pay more attention to my studies so I don’t disappoint you.”

As soon as they arrived at the Dragons Tongue cabin on Lake Solitaire, Teda and Colmac ushered Uncle Joe down to their boat to start their next adventure. Colmac knew exactly what he wanted to say about trail building and in fact, he had written much of it down so that he could be sure that Teda recorded his views fully in their journal.

Once they had crossed the lake by boat, Colmac and Uncle Joe led the way walking together, side by side. Colmac lost no time in starting his description of trail building. He planned, as far as possible, to use Uncle Joe’s

approach by identifying the ten most important points to describe what they had learned in building the Limberlost trails. He planned to try to relate as many of these points as possible to specific areas on the Solitaire Trail.

“First, and we feel most important, is to start each day’s work on the trails with a concern for safety foremost on our minds. This includes how we work around each other, being conscious of the dangers presented by dead trees that could fall down, and loose rocks we may dislodge; and thinking about such things as the need for support rails, bridges and stone steps. We periodically remind each other that virtually every wilderness accident is avoidable.”

“Second, in surveying the appropriate route for a trail, we try to find and then stick to the natural contours of the land. When there is a need to move to a higher or lower contour, we try to do this gradually over as long a stretch as possible.”

“Third, we try to re-contour the trail to ensure it is horizontally level. The section we are walking on now is a good example of us doing just that. We joke about not being born with a short leg when we have to walk on a trail that slopes to one side. You can see here how we have built up the downward slope with fallen tree logs and used other forest debris to provide some of the fill, which in turn is covered with earth excavated from the upper side of the trail. Without that the trail would have a forty-five degree slope and be extremely uncomfortable to walk along for any meaningful distance.”

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“Fourth, Uncle Joe, you will notice that the trees on either side of the trail are trimmed as high up as we can safely reach.”

Uncle Joe had already noted this and was quick to enquire, “How do you get so far up the trees? Surely, you don’t climb up every tree? That would take a great deal of time and add an element of danger.”

“No,” replied Colmac, “We use a long, sturdy aluminum pole and sometimes a ladder to reach even higher, while always remembering to wear safety glasses to avoid getting pieces of bark and other falling objects in our eyes. We also try to do this during the winter when the dead branches are dried out and brittle, and as a result are much easier to snap off. We believe that visitors to Limberlost are far more comfortable if they can look up and ahead, unimpeded by branches blocking their sight lines.”

“Now for my fifth trail building goal,” continued Colmac, “We plan the layout and course of the trail to maximize the points of interest by incorporating these into the trail route. For example, just ahead is the large white pine we talked about a few weeks ago. We have it marked clearly in the trail guide which is provided to visitors, and you can see from the information we have attached to the tree, that visitors can supplement their knowledge about these magnificent trees. Over here is a bench, should they wish to stop for a while and admire the view or rest under the tree.”

“I brought along one of the trail guides we prepared

for the purpose of enhancing the sense of adventure for visitors. The guides also help them locate the best views and other natural treasures they can enjoy along or just off of the trail.”

Uncle Joe stopped to walk around the White Pine tree a couple of times. Looking up, he said, “This is a true beauty and it certainly rivals the pines in the stand on Little Twin Lake.”

A short while later as they were approaching the hidden cliffs, otherwise known as the Windy Caves, Colmac returned once again to his trail building principles. “Uncle Joe, my sixth point is somewhat related to the previous one. It deals with maximizing the educational and finer points of any trail. This includes building small log bridges over rocky areas where water flows during the spring run-off; larger bridges over active streams; and even more extensive bridging erected at the base of cliffs, or cantilevered sections around large rock falls with steep hill slopes. We call these fun parts, because at initial glance they appear to be impassable and require a degree of ingenuity for the trail to proceed.”

“The area we are now entering incorporates a number of these challenges, starting with the tons and tons of earth and rock we had to dig from the hill side to fill the area just before we approached the cliffs. Then, we needed the extensive bridging system we just crossed to pass beneath and around the cliff base. The cave section which lies just ahead was a true mess from years of rock falls. We needed

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to build up and level a section of the cave floor to create this path. This required a lot of heavy mallet work to break up the rocks and a crow bar to move the larger rocks out of the way.”

Uncle Joe, who had last been in the area a number of years ago, was genuinely surprised and impressed with the effort and quality of the work that had been done to transform the trail into a place of great beauty. He commended them, “I now have no doubt that you can improve on nature, or at least you can tidy it up. The great thing is that you have been careful not to disturb the entrances to the many caverns used by animals as their homes.”

Teda, who had worked particularly hard on this section of the trail a few summers earlier when her brothers were away on a canoe trip, was proud to proclaim, “Yes Uncle Joe, there are always birds around these cliffs, summer as well as in the winter. We suspect that a pack of wolves has its den in this area and that higher up the cliff, black bears chose to hibernate.”

Shortly after leaving the Windy Caves, Colmac stopped to point out a rougher section of the trail, using it to illustrate his seventh trail building principle, “We try not to forget how important it is to complete each section of the trail to the desired quality as we go along and before we start the next. It is very tempting to leave less satisfying tasks, such as the removal of protruding rocks or tree roots to deal with at a later time. Breaking new ground is always more exciting than the tedious chores of clean up and fine

grooming of a trail to a high standard of quality.”

“It requires a lot of discipline to resist the natural tendency to push ahead and make as much ground passable as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, once we go ahead, we tend not to go back and properly finish off the stretches we’ve left behind. I guess this is a human trait we have yet to completely conquer.”

“The next few sections of the trail are equally interesting. We have an active beaver dam that is fifteen feet high, less than thirty-feet from the lakeshore. It is amazing how they built it up so high over many years. A little further on there is evidence of the effort by settlers to clear land, including an abandoned flower garden where lilies still grow.”

“Our eighth trail building goal seems to be the toughest one to achieve, and that is to be successful in encouraging users of the trails to help maintain their appearance and general tidiness. In our case, we automatically do this by picking up branches and removing any other forest debris that falls onto the trail. We believe that bending down to remove a branch or stone as you walk or run along a trail adds to the quality of the exercise. However, we have not been too successful in persuading our visitors to do the same. We try to lead by example and hope that others will eventually follow in time.”

“Uncle Joe, you will probably be most interested in our ninth trail building goal, which is to ensure our trails are compatible with the local environment. We recognize

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that it is our responsibility to ensure that the design and maintenance of our trails are protective of nature and facilitate, rather than hinder, animal movement about the property.”

“Furthermore, since the environmental sensitivity is likely to vary over different parts of the trail, the levels of care required for each portion of a trail also varies. For example, we make sure our trails skirt around sensitive wetlands, and avoid established nesting areas for birds such as herons, owls, falcons and hawks. We recognize that protecting the environment also applies at the ground level, where we take care to manage water runoff with logs partially buried across trails with steeper grades, and construct natural stone culverts and bridges where appropriate.”

“We have already talked a bit about our tenth goal, which is to make it easy for our guests to use our trails. This starts with maps and information guides setting out the grade, difficulty and distance covered by each trail. As previously mentioned, highlighting the location of selected points of interest seems to enhance the excitement of their discoveries.”

“We have found that a map is often not enough for many people who are unfamiliar with the wilderness, and therefore to further increase their comfort levels, we have attached different coloured decals every one hundred feet or so on the largest trees . Uncle Ted makes the decals by cutting plywood into four-inch squares, and then dipping them into a can of paint. Each colour signifies a different

route and we either attach them as squares or diamonds to differentiate the trails. Once trails are marked, we believe this significantly reduces the fears of individuals being lost for any length of time on the Limberlost Forest & Wildlife Reserve.”

“We know only too well how easy it is to get lost by wandering a hundred feet or so off a trail in dense bush or forest and then end up walking in circles for hours on end. With proper signs posted on our trails, hopefully even unsophisticated city folk will eventually encounter one of our hiking trails and then have a secure route to return to the main lodge.”

“Uncle Joe, you have probably noticed how we have challenged ourselves to use the materials we find in the forest such as fallen logs or trees, which in any event would need to be removed to clear a route. We have surprised ourselves about the size of the logs and rocks we can move to form retaining walls for the trail, and even our ability to lift them to higher ground by using a sturdy crow bar and in a few cases, a mechanical jack, or come-along.”

“Well, those are the ten most important trail building goals we identified when we prepared a booklet called, *A Personal Guide to Building and Enjoying Your Wilderness Trails*. We make it available to friends and visitors to Limberlost, and I believe it is on our web site. We learned a lot in the process and thought the booklet would be useful for other property owners who wish to build their own trails. When we return to the cabin we will find a copy for

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you, Uncle Joe.”

Uncle Joe responded with, “Thank you Colmac. I look forward to reading your trail booklet, but even more impressive is witnessing your pride and enthusiasm in describing your work. It is exceptional and unfortunate that most people will take your work for granted, not realizing the time, effort, skill and care all of you have obviously put into making them virtually works of art. You are worthy of Emerson’s praise of the great trail blazers of his time. You may have seen his description of a trail blazer, as being one who does not go where the path may be, but rather where there is no path; and creates a trail for others to follow.”

Thegar said, “I like that. We should write it down when we reach the cabin and perhaps carve it into a log.”

Uncle Joe continued with his praise. “It is commendable that you are all involved. You have obviously made it a family project and best of all, you have something lasting to show for it. I am sure every bend and twist in the trail means something special to you and will always be so in the future. Congratulations to all of you!”

It did not take very long before they reached Dragons Tongue, where Teda instinctively took it upon herself to introduce her father and Aunt Mary to Uncle Joe, and quickly described their objectives with respect to the nature journal and the many subjects they had already covered in their trips together.

Their father was very welcoming of Uncle Joe, telling him how many good things he had heard about him and how

grateful he was that the children have had an opportunity to learn from him. He went on to say, “I have thoroughly enjoyed many of the tales my children have related to me about your adventures in the area and your great understanding of nature. Today I hope we can hear some more.”

And so, a good day turned even better as the world seemed to fall comfortably into place for all them.

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Forest Conservation

Over lunch, the conversation turned to forest practices, partly because Colmac was deeply involved in a school project that dealt with clear cutting, forest fires and climate change. In addition, their Aunt Mary was intrigued with the alternative forest practices being successfully applied at the nearby Haliburton Forest and Wild Life Reserve.

Colmac introduced the topic by mentioning how surprised he was to find out that wildfires were seen by many as a healthy natural phenomenon in the life of forests, noting that, “Wildfires are considered an important part of the renewal of a balanced ecosystem. While every forest and woodlot owner goes to great lengths to prevent fires, left alone, it seems that forests, after reaching a certain age, begin to die naturally or become victims to insects or natural diseases. Wildfires supposedly cleanse a forest, giving it a fresh start by allowing it to rapidly re-grow.”

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Uncle Joe entered the conversation, saying, “Colmac, there is definitely a lot of truth in what you have read, however, you really can’t generalize since there are many different types of forests in Canada, which in turn have different natural frequencies for wildfires. For example, the lodge-pole pine forests of British Columbia and Alberta are particularly susceptible to fire, having a natural fire frequency of about forty to 60-years.”

“Without fire, some forests would begin to die after 125-years. In fact, jack pine forests require periodic fires to maximize their renewal. The resin in their seed cones need heat of at least 145°F to release the seeds to the forest floor, where they are un-shaded by mature trees and can therefore thrive. Other forests, such as many in this area, regenerate themselves naturally without the aid of fires as different species take over from each other without the need for wildfires.”

Uncle Joe added, “Since many forests in Canada are based on frequent disturbances, modern scientific harvesting systems try to emulate forest fires, tornadoes and other natural catastrophes. That is why so many clear-cuts have ragged edges and are quite small compared to the enormous cookie-cutter clear-cuts of the past. The forests around us right now are defined by frequent small natural disturbances that destroy just one or two trees. It is rare for us to have a big fire or tornado around here.”

Aunt Mary, who had recently attended a series of forestry lectures at the University of Toronto, added, “As Joe

just mentioned, the deciduous hardwood forests in Ontario and Quebec are thankfully far less susceptible to forest fires than the coniferous forests in the west. However, in lower lying lands, the deciduous forests often do end up being smothered by coniferous trees which are slower growing, but eventually grow taller and block out their sunlight. As a result, Ontario and Quebec experience longer periods between their forest fires than Western Canada. This is good for us and what we are trying to do.”

Uncle Joe reminded them again that, “Each forest is different. The topography, prevailing winds and weather patterns each have an impact on the types of trees most likely to thrive, their growth rates and the quantity of wood produced. Therefore, site specific analysis is required to assess the likelihood of fires and to determine the best ways to protect them to ensure their long-term health.”

Uncle Joe continued, “The quality of the forest soil, similar to a vegetable garden, represents another important ingredient for the health of the trees and their susceptibility to fire damage. Therefore, if you deplete the forest floor by removing leaves or tree branches, you not only damage the above ground biodiversity, but the next crop of trees will have fewer nutrients available to draw upon.”

Aunt Mary added, “Continuous selective logging has been promoted as an alternative to forest fires or clear cutting to regenerate a forest. Our group visited a forest where the selective logging method was used. In essence it involves the retention of the best specimens, distributing

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forest trimmings to speed up their decay, combined with more intensive forest management.”

She also noted, “The additional labour required, however, often makes selective forestry a viable option only for individual land owners such as farmers who can tend to their forests during slack periods when they would otherwise not be gainfully employed. Also, to be successful it requires concentration on higher value trees.”

In response to a question from Thegar, Aunt Mary said that she had been surprised to learn in her classes that, “As much as half of Canada’s land mass, namely one billion plus acres, is still forested and that this represents 10% of the world’s forests.”

“Unfortunately,” she continued, “large portions of Canada’s better quality forests have been severely degraded. Furthermore, since we have such a large forest mass, it seems that many of the government and industry practices are not designed to encourage conservation or reward long-term sustainable management.”

“The current forestry system in North America grew out of the demand by the forest industry for large quantities of low-cost timber and wood fibre for pulp mills. This led to ever larger lumber and pulp mills which put the small local mills out of business, and placed the individual woodlot owners at a major disadvantage in selling their logs.”

Uncle Joe added, “It is not surprising that to a large extent, farmers and private woodlot owners tend to resign themselves to accepting the prices posted by the mills and

the harvesting practices used by their loggers. As a result, they no longer view or operate their forest lands as viable self-sustaining operations, but rather resort to selling their best trees in bulk when prices rise.”

“These problems are compounded by the Crown owning most of the forest land in Canada and the willingness of provincial governments to apply a stumpage system which is seldom based on the real value of the wood. As your Aunt Mary mentioned, this does not encourage a long-term approach to the management of forest lands owned by individuals, as they are overwhelmingly mismatched when competing with logs harvested from government lands.”

On a more positive note, Aunt Mary suggested, “There are, however, some very encouraging examples of individuals rethinking and challenging the forestry practices of the past 150-years. Others have proven that sustainable forest management allows them to earn a significantly higher return from their forests both in the mid to long term. They achieve this by placing increased attention on long-term planning and harvesting their trees on a selective basis.”

“For example, they focus on first salvaging trees that are diseased and dying, or have fallen. These are carefully winched out or dragged by horses to the nearest logging road, and then skidded to a clearing with a tractor when ground conditions are suitable. The best trees are retained as long as they continue to grow. This requires periodic measurement and record keeping of growth patterns. Over time, the increased labour costs associated with this

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approach to forest management are more than covered by higher yields.”

Uncle Joe said, “I don’t know if any of you have heard about Jim Birkmeier, a Wisconsin farmer who harvests only one tree per acre per year from his 200-acre woodlot. Contrary to traditional practices, for the past thirty years he has focused on removing the least desirable trees in order to reverse the damage done in the past by the traditional timber loggers who did the opposite. His forest is now back to full sustainable production levels, producing close to \$1,000 per annum, per acre.”

“To derive this value from his forest, Jim Birkmeier acquired a portable sawmill using a thin, curved band saw blade which cuts logs up to three feet in diameter. By kiln drying the lumber himself, he increases the value of his logs to ten times what the local mill would pay for the raw logs. When sold as wide flooring boards or manufactured into tables and bookshelves, the values increase a further ten-fold.”

Uncle Joe continued, “There are others who are also intensifying the care of their lands with great success. Andy Dixon started as a very young man planting different species of trees on abandoned farm fields in southern Ontario; carefully measuring the annual growth of each stand of trees in relation to their natural environment and the changes he introduced.”

“For example, he found that planting fast-growing poplar windbreaks significantly increased the growth of the

slow-growing walnut and beech trees they sheltered, as it prevented the wind from causing the leaves to constrict and inhibit photosynthesis taking place. Once the trees were well-established and could provide their own protection, the Poplar trees were cut down.”

“He was also a strong believer in lopping off the lower branches to produce knot-free high-quality veneer logs. He did this during the winter or other times when he was not busy, believing that each branch removed led to a straighter tree trunk and two quality veneer logs being produced by each tree, rather than one saw log.”

“Most important, Andy Dixon conducted his experiments over a span of 70 years; and when well into his 90’s he wrote a 48-page booklet called *A Treatise on How Best to Grow Veneer Quality Lumber*, recording his findings. I recommend you read it because it will confirm to you that you are on the right track with many of the forestry initiatives you have recently introduced.”

“Furthermore, he is the only forest researcher in this part of the country who has actually witnessed the results of his experiments and constantly amended his practices to take account of his findings. The hands-on professional life of most university researchers or practicing foresters is seldom greater than twenty years, because they are usually promoted away from fieldwork to conduct managerial or administrative tasks or are moved to new locations. That is, they seldom see the results of their fieldwork and invariably their successors will have different ideas or not have

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the same passion that Andy Dixon had. He worked at perfecting his experiments three to four times longer than most other researchers ever have the opportunity to do.”

Aunt Mary then added, “I agree that we should all read his work, and even closer to home we are fortunate to have the Haliburton Forest and Wild Life Reserve to guide us. Known as the Living Forest, it has also adopted advanced forestry practices for about the same time period as Jim Birkmeier, but not yet as long as Andy Dixon.”

“Dr. Peter Schleifenbaum’s father acquired the 80,000-acre Haliburton Forest 40-years ago after it had been high-graded and virtually stripped of its valuable white pines and other valuable species. The forestry practices he has introduced focus on logging the weaker trees with minimum collateral damage to the rest of the forest; saving the best trees for further growth and for seeds. He also opens up selected areas of the forest to provide light for new growth to flourish.”

“He is constantly evaluating his trees to determine the soil conditions, water flows and the quantity of sunlight that maximizes their growth, while ensuring the ecosystem remains healthy and sustainable. In doing so, he has substantially reversed the damage caused by high grading. Rather than the wholesale clearing of stands, for many years he has only tagged mature and low-quality trees for cutting.”

“Because he has been saving his better trees, approximately three-quarters of the trees now being harvested from

his forest can be processed into lumber and the rest are sold for pulp and firewood. The overall improved condition of the forest has resulted in the veneer log component increasing each year.”

“After years of sustainable management, the Living Forest looks much like it did in the 1860s, before they were exploited through large scale commercial logging. Their success provides a promising local model for us to learn from, in that it lies directly between Limberlost and the Algonquin Outpost.”

Uncle Joe said, “Going further back, you can also learn a great deal from the forestry ethics of Native American bands, because they are extremely strong. They think and plan in much longer time spans than most commercial forestry companies, because they believe that it is their duty to protect their lands and treat them as a valuable resource for future generations.”

“The Menominee Indians, for example, do not allow a surge in the forest industry’s demand for maple logs to affect the way they harvest their forests. They will harvest only what they need in order to earn a fair return, while always taking care to keep the forest healthy and productive. For every 400 acres, they endeavour to have an individual spend their full time tending the trees in a sustainable manner.”

Uncle Joe concluded, “Another concept popular among Native Americans was called the *Seven Generations Promise*. This concept meant that each person benefitting

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from the forest made sure it would be in good conditions for his great-grandchildren's grandchildren, which is seven generations in the future. This sage concept led to the famous Cree saying ... 'We do not inherit the earth from our fathers, because we borrow it from our grandchildren'."

Colmac had been scribbling in his notebook throughout their lunch break, and in a relatively short span of time, had gathered a considerable amount of knowledge that would help them to improve the quality of their own forests on the Limberlost Forest & Wildlife Reserve.

Colmac recognized that he was the immediate and principal beneficiary of the lunch discussion and said, "Thanks everyone. You have contributed significantly to the research for my term paper. I owe each of you, and to start, I volunteer to do the dishes."

Teda exclaimed, "That will be a first. I will sit at the counter and keep you company. I want to enjoy every moment as I may never witness you washing dishes again. Uncle Joe, you have brought magic into our home. Colmac has an aversion to domestic chores and your presence has encouraged him to volunteer. This is the perfect end to a great day!"

Thegar chimed in, "Colmac led this morning's discussion and is now working double-duty with the kitchen chores, so I guess I have the honour of preparing for next week's discussion. Uncle Joe, what do you suggest the topic should be?"

Taking a moment to think about it, Uncle Joe respond-

ed, “Why don’t we stay with the forests. Perhaps you could do some research on the most valuable hardwood species indigenous to the Limberlost property and be prepared to talk about the role the lumber from these trees has played in our country’s development. Also, think of covering their use as a source of sugar and the scientific phenomenon which produces the blazing fall colours.”

“I will gladly do that!” Thegar enthusiastically replied, and then added, “You must have had more than enough socializing for one day, maybe even for a whole year. When you are ready, I would be pleased to drive you back to Little Twin Lake!”

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Deciduous Wonders

It had been agreed that they should meet Uncle Joe at sunrise the following Saturday near Uncle Ted's workshop, in order to get an early start to the day. From there they drove to the top of the first hill on Limberlost Road to start their hike through Bauer Park to Echo Rock. They had agreed that this was one of the best places to view the eastern portion of the Limberlost Forest & Wildlife Reserve and in particular, the deciduous trees that were concentrated on the higher ground and hill crests.

They walked at a leisurely pace for forty minutes or so before reaching the Echo Rock lookout, high above Lake Solitaire. They had agreed that they would wait until they were comfortably seated at the lookout before Thegar commenced his presentation.

When they were all seated, Thegar began, "I have taken a fair amount of license in deciding to focus on only

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three deciduous species. I chose to talk about them because they represent nearly three-quarters of the deciduous trees on the property and have each played important roles in the shaping of this country. Using this criteria, I have chosen maple, birch and beech trees as the species I wish to focus on.”

Having provided this introduction, Thegar continue, “Starting with maple trees, we all know that there are many varieties, but the most useful are the large hardwoods as they can be tapped for sugar, used to make high quality furniture and sliced into thin sheets and applied as attractive veneers to low-cost panel boards for flooring and other uses.”

He then turned to Uncle Joe and asked, “Didn’t you for many years satisfy all of your sugar needs for sweetening coffee, porridge or fruit, by tapping and concentrating maple sap? It certainly tastes better than sugar and is supposed to be healthier. It also makes great fudge. By the way, the bigger the foliage on the tree, the more sap it produces. Therefore, maples with small stems, but large crowns, are the best sap trees.”

A general discussion then took place about the location of the largest deciduous tree on the Limberlost property. Teda claimed it was along Oliver Creek; a kilometre or so north of Aunt Mary’s cabin. In disputing that, Colmac said, “I am aware of the maple tree you are talking about, and no doubt it is 150-years or more old, but Thegar and I know of two trees at the south end of Turtle Lake, which

are at least 25% larger. Our guess is that the largest one is eighteen feet around at its lower trunk.”

Uncle Joe added, “It must be growing in a fairly damp area with excellent soil conditions to reach that size. It could also be at least that age, as deciduous trees, unlike white pines, do not usually live much beyond that.”

“Uncle Joe, you are correct. It is growing in a low lying drainage area and the soil conditions are excellent,” responded Thegar. “We can visit it on our way back. I know exactly where to head east from the Limberlost Road to find the tree, and in any event, if we are a little off track we can walk up the Turtle Lake trail until we locate it.”

“The other deciduous tree I’d like to talk about is the birch tree, because, as Uncle Joe previously reminded us, it played an important role in Canada’s war effort. Birch trees in this area were ideally suited to create the high-strength but relatively light plywood required to build the Mosquito fighter planes which were used to defend Britain at the outset of World War II. The famous Spruce Goose airplane developed by Howard Hughes, also as part of the war effort, was made from yellow birch and not spruce, because it is such a strong wood.”

Uncle Joe added, “You are absolutely correct. The lands just west of here, now owned in a joint venture with your Aunt Mary, were also owned by the same company that previously owned the Living Forest. We spoke about those lands just last week. They harvested virtually every sound birch tree from these properties, meaning that they

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are only now starting to re-establish themselves in a meaningful way.”

Thegar reminded them, “Let’s also not forget how the Indigenous people moved around this land. They used birch bark to build their canoes. I’ve seen one of their early canoes at the Royal Ontario Museum. It was a true masterpiece, beautifully stitched and sealed with pitch. You will also recall how we used strips of birch bark to write letters on to send to our grandmother in Africa, and how much she treasured them.”

“The third deciduous tree I wish to talk about is the beech tree. It also played an important role in the development of this part of the province, both with respect to the use made of its wood and as a source of food. Its wood is heavy, hard, tough and strong. It was previously used extensively for flooring, furniture, boxes and for horse and ox wagons, whereas today it is used for railway ties and for flooring.”

“As a food source, the early settlers would gather beech nuts in the fall and use them to supplement their diet through the winter months. Beech nuts are also a favorite food for many birds, as well as black bears.”

“The bark, which is usually smooth, retains scars virtually throughout the life of the tree. It is not uncommon to find scarring high up on the trunk, caused many years earlier by the claws of bears which have climbed up the tree.”

“A beech tree will grow for up to two hundred years and occasionally longer. The leaves from older trees make

excellent compost, which the early settlers would use to enrich their vegetable gardens. Younger trees tend to keep their leaves through the winter even though they become dry and bleached at the end of their growing season.”

“That is all I was going to say about the beech tree. Do I have your permission to discuss a special coniferous tree?” asked Thegar. “I would like to do this since one variety in particular comes to mind as having played a significant role in the development of Toronto. May I go ahead?”

Thegar looked to Uncle Joe for his nod of approval, but before he could do so Teda was quick to respond, “Why not? We are here to learn and it is clear you have gathered information which will surely be of interest to us.”

Seeing that the others concurred, Thegar continued, “It is because we have been dealing with trees which have played a key role in the country’s development, I felt that it was important to talk about the mighty hemlock tree. I say mighty, because they grow very large and the wood is extremely strong.”

“Unfortunately mature hemlock wood is also extremely hard, requiring nails to be pounded in when the wood is still green, otherwise you need to drill holes with a strong bit. As a result, it is used mainly as coarse lumber for home siding, fences and barns. Incidentally, you have to take care when burning it indoors, as it will throw off sparks.”

“Theseregions—theMuskokaandHaliburton Highlands – were heavily populated with hemlock, however the lumber companies cut virtually all of the large trees in the 1950’s

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and 1960's to provide support timbers for the Toronto subway system. Worldwide, there are about ten species of hemlock, of which only three are native to Canada. The eastern hemlock is in this part of the country."

"Another reason for mentioning hemlock is the role it played for centuries in providing tannin for curing and softening animal hides. It was first used by Indigenous people, and later by the commercial tanneries for this purpose. You can blame them for the dead-standing Hemlocks which have been stripped of their bark, and for the bare logs lying on the ground in the eastern and southern sections of Algonquin Park. I had noticed these on our summer camp canoe trips, and only yesterday did I realize how they came to be in this condition."

"The eastern hemlock grows for ages, living up to 600 years. Dan Mansell and his colleagues from the Sunset Farm Hunt Camp know of one such tree in Bauer Park that they have promised to take us to see one day. We have searched for it on our own, but have been unable to locate where it is."

Uncle Joe commented, "I believe I know where the tree is located. It is no taller than the surrounding trees and is therefore hard to locate from a hilltop. It is, however, really thick around its trunk."

Thegar went on, "There are many other deciduous trees on the Limberlost Forest & Wildlife Reserve, such as poplar, black cherry and oak; but none of these, at least to my knowledge, have played roles in the development of

the country as important as the maples, birch and beech,” concluded Thegar.

Teda added, “Thegar, please keep your notes for me as I want to capture as much of your research as possible for our journal. What about the research you were going to share with us on the deciduous leaves changing colours in the fall?”

Before Thegar could respond, Uncle Joe remarked, “Thegar that was excellent, and you certainly picked the most prominent deciduous species to talk about. I would guess that there is not much that any of us could add. But before we move on, it is worth taking a moment to look over Lake Solitaire at the maples on the hilltops to the south east and the birch trees in the centre and closer to the lake. In the distance you can see an even larger stand of maples.”

“I find it extremely peaceful to look down over the forest in this manner, and if I have a problem I need to think through, I know of no better place to be. When the fall comes, I would like us to return to this spot and enjoy the striking colours of the red and yellow leaves. At the same time we should also take the opportunity to reflect on what we have learned this year and contemplate what we should do next. I have no doubt that this setting will inspire us to do the right thing. Meanwhile, Thegar why don’t you continue and tell us how the trees will have prepared themselves when we come back to view their warm, bright colours?”

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“Well,” started Thegar, “The green colour in the summer months houses the chlorophyll that produces the food trees need to grow their branches, feed their roots and expand their trunks. In the fall, however, food production halts and the large, flat surfaces of the leaves, which are useful during the summer for catching the sunlight, become a burden, allowing precious moisture to evaporate.”

“Then, as the days get shorter and cooler, the trees prepare themselves to jettison their leaves as the chlorophyll starts to disappear. With the poplar, beech and birch, it has been described as a layer of green paint being scraped away, as the green gives way to yellow and orange colours.”

“Scientists have yet to agree on precisely why the annual transformation takes place. Changing from green to yellow is a passive operation, so it may be an accident of nature, without real purpose. But turning red requires specific enzymes, and a complex chemical reaction.”

“Researchers at Harvard University recently advanced a new theory as to why only some maple leaves turn bright red. They suggested that male maple trees do this in an effort to extract the remaining nutrients from their dying leaves. Other species don’t seem to bother. The red pigment seems to act like sunscreen, protecting the maple leaves from damage as the nutrients are taken from the leaves.”

Thegar then concluded, “That is about all I could find out and it seems that no one is quite sure how it all works. What I am more confident about is where the best places

are to view the trees changing colours. After discussing this with Uncle Ted and others, I have identified four easily accessible sites, which are either on the Limberlost Forest & Wildlife Reserve or are within a short driving distance.”

“The first lookout is a relatively short climb to the top of the old ski hill which has one of the highest vantage points in the region. We can either walk directly up the face of the ski hill or we can drive to the Tree Tops parking area on the Barlow Road and head east on the Ski Hill Trail, passing the Ski Hill Lookout Cabin and continue on the trail for another hundred yards or so to the crest of the hill.”

“The second lookout is the communication tower at the top of Millar Hill, which is a kilometre or so drive from Limberlost’s southern gate. We can also hike to the tower via the Kalonga Valley by climbing up the hill near the large beaver dam.”

“The third lookout is the Dorset Observation Tower, which is the best known public viewing point in the region. It requires a 40 km drive from Limberlost to the Town of Dorset. The tower is located close to the highway, and was built in the 1920s to keep a watch out for forest fires over the Muskoka and Haliburton region. This remained the tower’s main purpose until the 1950s when airplanes began to take over the role.”

“Uncle Joe, I do however agree that where we are now is probably the best site of all, at least for us. It not only provides a picturesque view of Lake Solitaire, but it also

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lets us see a very large section of the eastern portion of the Limberlost property. Furthermore, very few people know about it, which makes it even more enjoyable.”

Teda added, “I agree, and I very much look forward to returning in the fall and reflecting on all the wonderful days we have spent together this summer. I don’t know how it could get any better.”

“Well,” said Uncle Joe, “there is one way we could make it even more meaningful. *The International Wildlife Journal* has been after me to do a series of three articles on the history of wildlife conservation in northern Canada over the past hundred years or so. They feel I am well suited to write on this topic from my years of experience in the northern wilderness. Teda, would you like to help, because I don’t think I could write the articles on my own? If we do a good job we could actually have an impact on pending wildlife legislation because the journal is extremely influential.”

Teda enthusiastically replied, “Of course. I would love to work with you on it, and I am sure the boys would want to pitch in too.”

“Thank you Teda. That is great. I guess we should start heading back if we wish to visit the large maple tree on Turtle Lake. I feel we have had another very productive day, thanks to Thegar’s research. Plus, we have agreed that this is the right place to assess our summer’s work and decide how we go forward in the years to come.”

On the walk back, Teda volunteered, “I would like to lead a discussion next week on coniferous trees, as it would be useful for me to coordinate this work with the term paper I need to prepare, and your input would be very helpful. Since we’ve covered deciduous trees so well today, our journal would also seem incomplete if we don’t have a complimentary entry for conifers. I am happy to research the more prominent species growing on the Limberlost property, bearing in mind that in one of our first discussions Uncle Joe introduced us to the white pine and Thegar today talked about the eastern hemlock.”

“That would be great Teda,” responded Uncle Joe. “I am already looking forward to next week!”

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Coniferous Green

When Teda asked Uncle Joe his opinion on where the best place would be to view a broad variety of coniferous trees, without hesitation, he suggested they revisit Eastall Lake in Bauer Park, on the western side of Limberlost Forest. He also suggested that they return by following the watercourse southward down the McReynold Valley to the Brenn Meadow.

The next Saturday they met at the Limberlost workshop to collect the amphibious Argo tracked vehicle, designed to travel through varying Canadian terrains. Colmac mentioned to Uncle Joe that the vehicle had been chosen because it left a very light footprint, whether travelling in the woods or across marshy areas. He said it was capable of entering lakes and crossing wetlands with minimal disturbance to the banks of the watercourses or damage tree roots.

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Uncle Ted had made a case for acquiring the vehicle shortly after Colmac and Thegar lost their way on the west side of the Boyene River in a snow storm during the past winter. He claimed that a tracked vehicle capable of travelling at speed through snow, wetlands, frozen lakes and clear water, would significantly speed up rescue attempts; especially if broken limbs were involved.

To reach the McReynold Valley they travelled four kilometres westward by land through Bauer Park to Eastall Lake. Upon arriving at the south end of Eastall Lake, they entered the lake and exited on its west bank, which formed part of the joint venture lands owned with their Aunt Mary. They then headed southeast towards McReynold Lake where they left the Argo. Walking along the eastern shoreline of the lake, they stopped periodically as Uncle Joe pointed out various species of coniferous trees.

The first tree Teda had selected to discuss in some detail was the larch, which she reminded them were often called tamarack. “The unique thing about the larch is that because it looks like a pine tree, we assume this makes it a conifer. The larch, however, sheds its needles in the winter, which by definition also makes it a deciduous tree. Nevertheless, I do want to talk briefly about it.”

Teda continued, “You are likely to find larch trees in places similar to this where the land is poorly drained. This enables their roots, which are shallow and wide spreading, to survive. In dry or exposed soils, the summer heat warms the land which in turn kills much of their root systems.

Since the land around the eastern shore of this lake is bog-like, it is perfect for larch trees. In these types of conditions, they will grow to seventy feet or so high, making them a mid-sized tree. They can live for up to 150 years, that is unless porcupines find them as they enjoy eating their bark. This either kills them or stunts their growth.”

“Larch trees are confusing in another way, in addition to being the only deciduous conifer. While they are officially a softwood species, their wood is actually harder and stronger than many hardwood species. That is why the flooring factory beside the Tembec sawmill in Huntsville sometimes makes specialty floor boards from larch trees.”

Thegar looked a little confused by all the contradictions found with classifying larch trees. He asked, “Teda, can you please tell us a simple way to refer to two different types of trees? I think calling them hardwood or softwood and deciduous or coniferous is confusing when we talk about larch trees and other unusual species.”

Teda said, “You make a good point, Thegar. I found in my research that many foresters use other terms to refer to the two types of trees. All of the trees with cones for seeds are called gymnosperms, which means ‘naked seed.’ This includes hemlock, larch, all the pines, the spruces, balsam fir and cedar, too. All of the other trees, like the maples, birches and other species we discussed last week, are called angiosperms, which means ‘covered seed,’ since their seeds are wrapped in a small flower.”

Uncle Joe sensed that Thegar was even more con-

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fused, and added, “I suppose we could also refer to different types of trees by the types of leaves or needles they have. For example, broadleaf trees would include all of the hardwoods, and needle trees would include all of the softwoods, except cedar, because it has scales.”

Uncle Joe continued, “In returning to the trees around McReynold Lake, I should mention that the lake area was once a much larger body of water, 20 to 30 years ago. With the collapse of a major beaver dam a kilometre or so downstream, the lake has receded, creating a fifty-foot swath of wet, but fertile shoreline. This gave the white pine seeds a chance to germinate beyond the original dense shoreline canopy and hence you can see hundreds of young white pines thriving, because they have clear access to sunlight. It is a veritable nursery with thousands of dollars worth of trees if you ever chose to harvest them and sell them through a garden centre.”

Thegar said, “That reminds me about something I came across in my research last week. Do you know why all lakes have shorelines dominated by coniferous trees? It is not because they are more competitive than deciduous trees. This phenomenon is simply due to the fact that beavers prefer to gnaw on deciduous stems, since coniferous wood splinters in their mouths.”

Teda then led the discussion to the next type of coniferous tree she had selected to talk about, pointing out the many young and very healthy spruce trees also growing in the area, and in particular, the black spruce. She mentioned

that, “These must be distinguished from the giant sitka spruce that grow on the west coast of British Columbia, Oregon and Alaska. Black spruce tend to grow to ninety-feet and live for two hundred years, whereas sitka spruce can grow to nearly double this height, and live for seven hundred to eight hundred years. You will all be surprised to learn that more than 40% of the trees in Ontario are spruce trees. This species is by far the most important type of tree in the boreal forest, which begins just a few hundred kilometres north of here.”

“Spruce wood is used for pulp, building materials and containers as it has no odor. Black spruce grown in Canada is often considered superior to similar trees grown elsewhere, because the short growing season means that the wood is dense and solid, rather than brittle. Black spruce trees are also used extensively for landscaping because they have a full appearance and their needles remain on their branches for seven to ten years.”

Teda was excited to continue informing them about the many uses made of the wood from Canada’s most prominent trees, explaining, “Not many people know about the food value of spruce trees. For example, the pulp in your orange juice is actually spruce pulp, since fruit pulp would dissolve soon after being extracted! Even more interesting, the vast majority of the world’s vanilla flavouring is from the inner bark of black spruce; vanilla beans are far too expensive to grow in tropical countries, while spruce trees are abundant throughout northern Canada.”

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Hearing Teda explain how spruce trees provide many food products reminded Colmac of something he had learned during conversations with conservationists over the last few years. He thanked Teda for reminding him about another important use for spruce trees. “Apparently clothes made from rayon are really made from highly refined spruce pulp. In fact, there are many scientists at the University of Toronto who are researching ways to produce ultra-light and ultra-strong plastics from spruce trees.”

Thegar enquired, “Uncle Joe or Teda, would you show us how to distinguish a spruce tree from a balsam fir? Uncle Ted has said that they look similar, but the one produces useful wood while the other is a junk tree.”

Uncle Joe replied, “Ted is correct. The core of the Balsam tree often rots and hollows out from their tenth year onwards, at least in this part of the country. People refer loosely to balsam trees as firs, however, there are many types of fir trees, just like there are many types of maple trees. Unfortunately you have your fair share of balsam fir around.”

Teda added to Uncle Joe’s point, “At first glance, balsam fir can be mistaken for spruce trees, however, you will see that the spruce tree needles grow all the way around the twigs, whereas the balsam needles grow only on either side of the twig. If you feel these two different twigs, you will see that the needles on one are flat whereas the other is full of needles all around. Another easy way to tell the difference is that balsam trees are the only ones with gum in the

bark. You can see the blisters full of sap on balsam trees, which are not found on spruce trees.”

Uncle Joe, always mindful of the commercial value of the forest, said, “It is important to be able to tell the difference between these trees because balsam fir trees often grow faster than more desirable species after harvests. Sometimes foresters will go into a harvested forest a few years after logging to cut down the balsam fir so that it will not smother or compete with other trees like spruce or pine.”

Continuing, Teda mentioned, “Uncle Joe has previously talked to us about white pine. I would therefore be remiss if I did not mention red pine. Around thirty years ago, the government promoted it extensively under its reforestation plans. They provided private property owners with seedlings at little or no cost, on the condition they agreed to tend to them. You will find such a plantation near the large gravel deposit close to the Millar Hill concession line. You can recognize them as they are the only native two-needle pine in eastern Canada. The wood is easily penetrated by preservatives, making it suitable for telephone and fence poles.”

Uncle Joe added, “Talking about poles, there are no better natural ones than those made from cedar wood. Since cedar trees have their own natural preservatives, their wood takes years to deteriorate and decay. When we are next on Turtle Lake, I will show you some old cedar stumps. These trees were logged about a hundred years ago and the stumps

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are still in fairly good shape. They are at least three feet across, but unfortunately there are very few of this size on the property today.”

Teda continued the discussion on cedars, adding, “Cedars usually live for a couple of hundred years, although some relatively small stunted trees have been found that are over seven hundred years old. In this area, they grow best along the edges of the lakes, often bending over the water before turning upwards. Although the outer wood is resistant to decay, the centres of the trees are susceptible to heart-rot, resulting in their trunks being hollow. The leaves of the young trees are a favourite winter food for white-tailed deer, which clearly annoys Ted as he has planted hundreds of them to hide his fences and storage areas.”

Remembering another food value of coniferous trees, Teda said, “Thegar and Colmac, you will remember from your Canadian history lessons at school that the first European explorers in Canada only survived the winters because the Native Americans of the Huron tribes on the St. Lawrence River showed them how to make tea from fresh cedar branches. If they had not made this tea during the winter, many of them would have died from scurvy, which is a disease caused by a lack of Vitamin C.”

Moving their discussion along, Uncle Joe added, “In total, the Limberlost property is host to approximately twenty different species of trees. I think we have covered at least half of these at some length, including white pine, hemlock, maple, spruce, cedar, balsam, beech, larch and

birch. Incidentally, the species we have covered account for eighty percent of the trees on the property.”

“It is good that we have given equal consideration to the deciduous and coniferous trees, because they are both very important for the lumber industry as well as the natural ecology of the forests. I am especially happy that we are finishing our conversation on coniferous trees, since they are less common at Limberlost, but nevertheless provide a disproportional amount of ecological benefits to the fauna in this area.”

Uncle Joe concluded, saying, “We have probably talked enough today about trees. Let’s now work our way down the Boyene watercourse where we will be sure to see a variety of ducks. This is great duck breeding territory.”

“Thanks Uncle Joe,” responded Teda. “It should make for an interesting afternoon. If we follow the river all the way to Millar Hill, and find that we are tired, we could radio Uncle Ted to see if he or our sister Leslie would mind picking us up. I am sure the boys would agree to fetch the Argo in the morning. I think we can be sure that no one is going to run off with it in the meanwhile.”

“That’s a great idea Teda,” replied Uncle Joe. “It will give us the additional time to visit parts of the property we would probably not otherwise see this year.”

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Timber Wolves

A light fog lingered when the three children arrived the following weekend to meet Uncle Joe. It had rained over night and the morning sun was doing its best to burn through the cool, damp air. Uncle Joe had been waiting for such conditions to search for fresh wolf tracks, and to lead a discussion on this often-maligned animal.

“How are you doing, my friends!”, Uncle Joe greeted them enthusiastically as the children walked towards him with his faithful companion Moe remaining by his side. He was still seated on his favourite log enjoying his morning coffee. “Isn’t this a perfect day to scout for wolf tracks? Colmac, I remember you mentioning that quite a few wolf sightings had been made near Turtle Lake, close to your Aunt Mary’s cabin. Why don’t we start our walk around that lake today and we’ll see what we can find?”

“You must have been reading my mind, Uncle Joe,”

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answered Colmac. “I was going to suggest the same route for today.”

Together they rode in the old Jeep to the beginning of the trail which circled around Turtle Lake. As they drove, Colmac passed Uncle Joe an envelope with some photographs that Aunt Mary had taken the previous winter. They showed several wolf imprints running alongside the tracks of a deer.

“This illustrates very well how wolves actually hunt,” said Uncle Joe. “I’m sure you will elaborate on this Colmac, am I right?”

“Certainly, Uncle Joe,” replied Colmac as he pulled the Jeep well off to the side of the road so that it would not block the way for Aunt Mary and her family. They then started their hike with Colmac leading Uncle Joe down the trail to the narrows where there was a yellow kayak pulled high up on the shore, alongside a large cedar tree.

Thegar explained, “We are in the process of devising a permanent bridging system across the lake narrows, but we have to make sure that our sister Leslie will be able kayak through this gap between the two lakes to visit Aunt Mary’s cabin. Leslie’s house is on the other side of Clear Lake and she likes to use this passage to enter Turtle Lake as part of her daily training routine. That is the likely compromise solution, at least for now.”

Thegar motioned for Uncle Joe to step into the kayak and then pushed the kayak gently away from the shore. He made sure the rope was secured to the kayak so that the

next person would be able to pull it back to also use it to cross the narrows.

Once they were all across and out of the kayak, the group began their hike to the clearing, past the large basswood tree that they had visited earlier in the summer. This is where Aunt Mary had taken the photos of the tracks during the winter, and Colmac thought they might get lucky and see some fresh tracks in the soft ground. While they walked, he started to describe some of the basic facts he had learned about wolves.

Colmac began his presentation by saying, “I thought that I should start by mentioning that there are two types of wolves known to be in this area, being Grey Wolves and Eastern Wolves, which are also referred to as Timber Wolves.”

“At one time, when the early settlers first arrived here, the Grey Wolf was the dominant species, but over time the Timber Wolf population has grown to surpass the number of Grey Wolves in the area. This is largely because of the near elimination of Grey Wolves by the early settlers, who hunted them to protect their livestock and because they wrongly assumed that the wolves were a threat to their families.”

“According to the National Wildlife Federation, there are only three documented cases of wolves ever attacking humans in North America. I would say that this is a good indication that we are in no danger of being tracked and maimed by a wolf.”

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“That may be true Colmac,” interjected Teda, “But they are animals, and if they are starving and unable to hunt, like some breeds of domestic dogs, they will attack humans.”

“That is a good point Teda,” responded Uncle Joe, “But it is also true that wolves are known to be shy and to avoid contact with humans. Also, if their natural prey is abundant they will not resort to hunting livestock. That was actually how the bad blood between wolves and humans erupted.”

Uncle Joe continued, “With the arrival of the early settlers, they began hunting in order to feed themselves and quickly lowered the numbers of deer and moose. Beavers were also being heavily trapped for their furs. This led to wolves resorting to alternative prey, and sometimes this included the settlers’ livestock. This is where the catch twenty-two set in.”

“Thank you Uncle Joe,” said Colmac. “You’ve covered that topic well for us, so I will now move on. Teda, you mentioned dogs just a moment ago, and as it turns out, wolves, like coyotes, are indeed members of the canine family. The closest dog species that are comparable to the wolf are German Shepherds, although wolves have longer legs, longer muzzles, much deeper and narrower chests, and have more slender and graceful bodies. Another important distinction between wolves and dogs is that a dog can have two litters of pups in a year, while a wolf is capable of delivering only one.”

“Also, the life span of a domestic dog can range into the mid to high teens, whereas wolves rarely live past ten years. In fact, the average age of wolves in this part of the country is known to be only three to six years.”

Thegar seemed surprised at this low number, “That seems like an awfully short life span. Can either of you or Uncle Joe explain why they have such a short life span?”

“Yes, it does seem short Thegar,” answered Uncle Joe, “But don’t forget that they are living in the wild and are exposed to disease, injury and parasites that cannot be treated the same as they would be for a domesticated dog. In addition, many believe that nearly two-thirds of wolf mortality can be linked to human activity.”

“Not only are they hunted by uninformed landowners, but worse still they are also often purposely poisoned. Vehicle collisions involving wolves are very high, especially with the growing numbers of people who head north from the cities each weekend to spend time at their cottages.”

“And like you said before,” concurred Colmac, “It is a double-edged sword. People have a desire to enjoy the wilderness, but that often means at the expense of the natural wildlife. I guess it is unrealistic to believe that everyone will learn to be respectful of their needs.”

At that point the eager group of hikers reached the large basswood tree, and after again stopping to admire its majestic beauty, Thegar mentioned he had recently found some interesting facts he wanted to share with them.

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“In some cultures, basswood trees are called the *Lovers’ Tree*, due to the heart shape of their leaves. Native American’s and early settlers used its fibrous inner bark, which they called bast, to make baskets. The early settlers translated this to basswood, and hence the name we have come to use today; even though they are known almost everywhere else as linden trees.”

“The wood of the basswood tree is soft and therefore popular for carving and making furniture. The fragrant yellow blossoms in late spring are used for herbal tea and honey gathered from the immediate area is exceptionally tasty.”

Recognizing that he had wandered way off topic, Thegar apologized and started to search for fresh tracks in the damp soil that was on and nearby the trail.

After a few moments, Uncle Joe expertly located two sets of tracks that clearly were left by wolves, and he called for his companions to join him to study his find. “Colmac, what can you tell us about these tracks?”

They quickly assembled around Colmac, as he stooped down to study the tracks and compare them to the winter photos that he carried with him in his back pocket.

“Well Uncle Joe, it seems that these wolves were walking when they passed through here, possibly looking for a scent trail that would lead them to an injured deer, or a smaller animal, perhaps a rabbit. I don’t think it would be a beaver since they are known to be farther down the lake and at the top of Oliver’s Creek.”

“That’s very good Colmac,” praised Uncle Joe. “But why do you say they are walking, as opposed to trotting or running on the trail?”

Colmac examined the photos once more before explaining, “Obviously a wolf’s survival depends on their hunting ability, which means that they rely on silent, fast motion when they are running towards a potential kill.”

“If you look at Aunt Mary’s photos you will notice that the wolves are striking the ground with their toes, similar to the way a cat would run, with the back parts of their feet hardly touching the ground. Also, if you look at the stride, the ones that we have here on the trail are not too far apart from each other, whereas the photographs highlight the wolves’ long, efficient stride while moving at a faster pace.”

“Well done Colmac,” said Uncle Joe. “Would you tell us more about the hunting strategies employed by wolf packs?”

Teda added, “Please do Colmac. I’ve often wondered when I’ve come across tracks of any animal, about what secrets these simple imprints can unfold.”

“Well,” answered Colmac, “As Uncle Joe has just mentioned, wolves generally live and hunt in packs, with the average size of a pack in this area being up to eleven wolves, including surviving pups. The size of a pack will depend on the availability of food, that is, if the food supply is low, then the number of pups being born into a pack, that manage to survive, is lowered proportionately. Also,

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the numbers in a pack may double in the spring when pups are born, but will decline over the winter due to mortality.”

“Wolf packs are highly efficient hunters. Since a group effort is always preferable when trying to bring down large, speedy prey, they will take turns attacking, allowing each other time to catch their breath. In this manner, a wolf that falls behind can rest up until another wolf tires.”

“Wolves are carnivores and they have a preference for large, hoofed animals, namely deer and moose, although beaver kills are also welcomed. Depending on the area, the food source is usually evenly divided between deer, moose and beaver, with a few birds and smaller rodents thrown into the mix when deer and moose are not available.”

“They kill their prey as quickly as possible, which is aided by their long, sharp and slightly curved teeth, allowing them to tightly grip the neck of the prey that they are trying to bring down.”

“The frequency of them hunting is dependent on the size of the pack. Each wolf needs to consume twelve or more pounds of meat every week or so, with higher consumption in the winter when energy demands are increased. Adult wolves bring back food from a kill in their stomachs to regurgitate the partially digested food for the pups to eat. Wolves have large stomachs that can hold up to eighteen pounds of food at a time.”

Thegar was very interested in this latest point. “I had no idea that wolves fed their pups in much the same manner that a bird would feed its young in the nest. Do you know

more about how they raise their young?”

Colmac obliged and said, “Well, that requires a two part answer, because I will also have to describe the social structure of a pack before leading into their breeding habits.”

“Wolves are very intelligent, highly social and complex animals. They have a well-developed social hierarchy, usually headed by the strongest and largest wolf, followed in rank by younger males, then the leader’s mate, the other females, and finally the pups, all in order of strength. Only the dominant male and female in a pack will mate, which they do in the winter, and the pups that result from their mating will be born after about two months, arriving shortly before the spring. I should also mention here that wolves tend to mate for life.”

“Wolves do not normally live in shelters, but will establish a den to raise a litter when the mother is ready to give birth. These dens are usually built on high ground so that they can watch for enemies. Older wolves with more experience will return to and reclaim previously used dens.”

“An average litter size is six pups, but could be as many as eleven, which as I’ve said earlier is largely dependent on the availability of food. Pups are born deaf and blind and survive on their mother’s milk for about sixty days, or until they reach a weight of about fourteen pounds. The mother therefore requires an ample supply of food to remain healthy enough to feed her pups.”

“The entire pack is responsible for raising the pups,

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and will take turns bringing back food for them once they start eating solid food. The pups begin to travel with the pack in the fall, and begin to hunt when they are adult size, which is at about at ten months of age.”

“That’s most of what I’ve been able to find out about wolves,” concluded Colmac. “Uncle Joe, I am sure there is much more you can add for us?”

“Thank you Colmac. I think we would all like to learn more about these misunderstood and unfairly judged animals. Perhaps I can add something useful about how territorial they are. Depending on the availability of prey, the size of a wolf pack’s territory may vary from about twenty-five to five hundred square miles. Wolves will howl to let other packs know which territories are occupied and will also spray urine on the ground and on trees to mark their boundaries. To defend their territory, wolves will fight or kill a lone wolf that wanders too far into their area.”

By now the group had made their way to the beaver meadow at the top of Oliver Creek. Although they were unable to locate any further wolf tracks, they did come across some very impressive moose prints close to the shores of the large pond above the dam.

Teda noted, “I think that since we have covered the hunter, we should now turn our attention to the hunted. Would anyone object if I were to volunteer to lead a discussion on moose and white-tailed deer at our next meeting?”

Thegar jumped right in, “I had the same thought Teda. I will help you with your research if you wish. You can

chose which of the two you would like to discuss and I will cover the other.”

“Thank you Thegar,” answered Teda. “Uncle Joe, does this sound like a good plan to you?”

Uncle Joe promptly responded, “I’m very pleased to see your minds working in unison and I always enjoy learning more from you.”

With that, they continued to hike along the trail, which followed a circuitous route back to their Jeep. On the way they passed the area where bears were known to hibernate during the winter months. They were careful to make create a noise by banging sticks against tree trunks as they approached the caves.

After dropping off Uncle Joe at the south end of Little Twin Lake, they waved good-bye and then headed back to their cabin to get ready for a long overdue work session on the hiking trails they started building earlier in the summer with their father and Aunt Mary.

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Animals at Large

Another school week quickly passed and soon it was time to meet up once again with Uncle Joe. When they arrived at their usual spot on Little Twin Lake, Uncle Joe was already there and anxious to hear how their preparation for the week's discussion had been divided between them.

Thegar explained on both his and Teda's behalf, "Well Uncle Joe, while we were out building hiking trails, we had a little bet on who would be the first one to collect and drag two full arm loads of trail cuttings and forest debris out of sight over a hill. The winner would get to choose their topic, but they would have to let the other person speak first. As it turned out, unknown to Teda I purposely lost our bet and Teda chose to speak about moose, so I will be starting today and will talk about white-tailed deer."

"That certainly was an innovative way to divide the work," observed Uncle Joe. "Now, where are we going to

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go today? There are still so many excellent spots on the Limberlost property to explore for and observe both deer and moose.”

Colmac was quick to volunteer, “We asked our father and he suggested that we drive and then hike to the clearing that lies just west of Eastall Lake, on the joint venture lands that we share with Aunt Mary. From there we can go west to Eagle Lake, and if we are extremely lucky we will see a moose or two.”

They entered the northern part of the reserve through the third gate along Limberlost Road and then headed south in the Jeep for two kilometres until the logging road became impassable.

It was then a short hike which brought them to the first clearing, where Teda explained to Uncle Joe, “We understand that the previous owners of this portion of the property made a number of clearings to create grass-covered feeding areas for deer. It does, however, require a bit of work on their part to keep the raspberry canes from growing up and defeating the purpose.”

Thegar began his discussion on white-tailed deer by suggesting that they find a sheltered area to sit quietly and wait for a group of deer to enter the clearing. “I understand that white-tailed deer have excellent eyesight, and a very keen sense of smell, so it is best to be down wind to reduce the chances of them detecting us.”

After checking to see which direction the breeze was blowing, Thegar led the group to a depression in the ground

behind a large fallen tree so that they would be out of sight and hopefully out of scent range. With Colmac's help, a smaller log was dragged to the spot and placed on top of the fallen tree to camouflage them even further.

The children knew that sitting on damp ground tended to aggravate Uncle Joe's old war wounds, so they also rolled a log behind their shelter for him to sit on.

They spoke softly as they waited patiently for a deer to appear in the clearing. Thegar impressed upon them, "White-tailed deer also have very good hearing, so we must make sure not to speak too loudly." Not wanting to make any unnecessary sound, the rest of the group just nodded their understanding.

Now that they were settled, Thegar went on, "This area is a particularly good spot for deer to graze, since it is very close to the cover of the forest. Deer use the wooded areas for protection, but enjoy grazing on grasses and other plants that grow in open areas like this. In the fall they will eat beechnuts, acorns and any other nuts they can find on the forest floor. During the winter, deer browse mainly on woody vegetation, like twigs and buds on deciduous trees and the leaves of cedars."

"Deer usually eat twice a day, and have a four part stomach that allows them to re-digest their food to maximize the absorption of its nutritional value. They will eat early in the morning, enough to fill their first stomach. Once their stomachs are full, they will take a rest while the food enters the second stomach. As the day goes on, deer

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will bring this food back into their mouths to chew it again before it enters their third and fourth stomachs to complete the digestion.”

Uncle Joe motioned to Thegar to halt his discussion for a moment. Three deer had just approached the clearing on the other side of the forest from where they sat. For what seemed like quite a long time, they watched in silence while the deer grazed on the grass.

Suddenly the largest deer raised her head and looked directly toward their shelter; aware that they were not alone in the clearing. She snorted twice, stamped her hooves and flashed her bright white tail, sending a signal to the other deer that it was time to move on. As the deer bounded out of the clearing into the thick forest, to the surprise of the observers, two young fawns skirted the edge of the forest to follow on the heels of the other deer.

“Well that was something,” said Uncle Joe, sounding very pleased at what they had just witnessed.

“Yes it certainly was,” agreed Colmac. “But what is your explanation for the two fawns appearing as though from nowhere and that we didn’t previously see them with the group? Can you explain that to us Uncle Joe.”

“I can answer that,” replied Thegar. “And if I miss anything, Uncle Joe, maybe you can fill in the blanks.”

Uncle Joe was impressed with his enthusiasm, “O.K. Thegar, let’s hear why we didn’t see those two fawns in the clearing.”

“Well first, the mother must be a few years old in order to have what appears to be twins. A mother will generally wean her fawns when it is time to give birth to new ones, but occasionally she will let her previous offspring stay with her for up to two years, which may explain why there were two other fairly young deer in the clearing.”

“Second, the young fawns were hidden in the brush or thick grass, and probably separated from each other for their own protection. She will visit with them five or six times during the day to make sure they are fed, and to ensure they keep within range to follow her if danger appears.”

“My third point, and how I am able to guess that the largest deer is more than a few years old, is that a doe that breeds for the first time will usually produce only one fawn, but subsequently will have twins and occasionally triplets, if there is ample food.”

Colmac was impressed, but asked Thegar, “How is it that you know there were only does in the meadow?”

“The fawns were a good indication,” replied Thegar, “But also, there are two types of social groupings for deer in the summer months. The family group, which is what I believe we have seen, consists of the mother and her offspring. The buck group, would consist of three to five individual bucks, but at this time of year they would be starting to disband to get ready for the rutting season. It didn’t appear that the group we saw was made up of mature bucks, so I believe it was a family group.”

“Incidentally, the social groupings do not necessarily

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apply in the winter. Although bucks and does will roam separately for most of the year, they will gather together in the winter, or ‘yard up’, in order to move in larger numbers to more easily keep trails open for their use. This provides them with speedier escape routes from predators. I’ve read that a ‘yard’ of deer can be up to one hundred and fifty animals.”

“I agree with Thegar,” commented Uncle Joe. “It was a family group that we saw. Thegar, your research was very good. Why don’t you now tell us a bit about the rutting season you just mentioned?”

“Sure,” said Thegar, adding, “I found this to be interesting but a bit complicated. The rutting season begins when the male, or buck, starts to shed the velvet from its antlers. If bucks are still together in groups, sparring for dominance increases. This consists of two male deer trying to push each other backwards with their antlers. When the buck group breaks up, several bucks will independently follow a doe, with the largest buck endeavouring to dominate the other bucks so that he may mate with one or several does if they are in range.”

Thegar then changed the subject to deal with predators. “What I also found interesting is that large bucks are capable of defending themselves against most predators with their antlers and hooves. They will butt a wolf with their antlers and then kick and stamp on it with their hooves. Unfortunately, wolves often hunt in packs, as we learned last week from Colmac, so if more than one wolf

is hunting a deer, the buck may not be able to kill a wolf to scare off the rest. Coyote, bobcat, lynx and cougars are other predators of white-tailed deer. Oh, I almost forgot to mention, that hunters are an ever larger threat, but at least they are regulated and it is only legal to hunt for a relatively short period each year.”

“Wow, Thegar” said Teda, “You covered quite a bit on white-tailed deer. I have a lot to live up to. I think we should move on though. It is really starting to warm up and if we wait too much longer it will be too late in the day to see any moose at Eagle Lake.”

It required a brisk twenty minute hike due west to reach Eagle Lake, portions of which were fairly swampy, with a profusion of the type of plant growth favoured by moose. They found a spit of land which allowed them to shelter behind a rocky outcrop while still being able to view both the east and west sides of Eagle Lake.

Teda wasted no time in starting her presentation, “I can’t think of a less attractive animal in the Canadian forests than moose. Their legs are very long, their hooves are large, they have humps on their backs, very short tails and wide droopy noses with an overhanging top lip. They would lose out, hands down, to white-tailed deer in a beauty contest.”

“Having said that, they are very powerful animals, able to defend themselves against virtually all predators other than if they are injured or sick. They grow as tall as seven-feet, and ten-feet in length, and can weigh more than

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1,200 pounds. Males have large, wide antlers, up to five feet across, which are very effective in fending off attackers, including bears. Because they are so large they need to consume a lot of food each day.”

Thegar interjected, “Teda, do you know where the word moose comes from? It means ‘eater of twigs’ in the Algonquin Indian language. In Europe, similar animals are usually called elk. At least in North America, moose are considered the largest member of the deer family. In Africa, kudo are perhaps larger.”

“Thanks Thegar,” continued Teda. “No, I didn’t know that. I have one further comment to add though. Unlike other deer, moose live a fairly solitary life, often being on their own for long periods of time. They have poor eyesight and therefore rely on their sense of smell, which is a lot better developed than ours.”

Uncle Joe thanked Teda and then suggested they visit the old homestead lands west and north of Eagle Lake. “The homestead was probably one of the better ones built and one of the longest settled, but in the end, the family also unfortunately had to give up and move on. The harsh winters and poor soil conditions could not match the more fertile soil of the prairies or the lures of city life.”

As they left, Uncle Joe added, “I am sorry Teda that we have been unlucky in not seeing the animal that you chose to discuss, but I think the odds were stacked against us from the beginning, given the time of year. We can make a point of returning here early next spring, when the plant

growth is fresh and the moose are satisfied to laze the day away wandering in the water, protected from the black flies.”

“Anyhow Teda,” continued Uncle Joe, “Your facts were accurate and it was very interesting in how you presented them.”

“Thanks Uncle Joe, but there is one more thing I wanted to mention,” continued Teda. “Well, even though there are close to one-million moose in Canada, you don’t often see them, especially at this time of the day. Their numbers are large, partly because they can live as long as twenty-five years. Once they are grown, they can move fast, even through wet and muddy ground, by spreading their two large toes wide apart to avoid sinking. They are also good swimmers which is another reason why predators, other than the human kind, seldom succeed in harming them.”

Colmac added, “I’ve been told that you have to be very careful not to surprise a moose, because when they become angry they can be very dangerous. They will crash through the trees, and not having very good eyesight, they probably can’t distinguish you from a bear or any other predator. They can also move very quietly through the forest, should they sense danger.”

As they approached the Jeep, Uncle Joe volunteered, “I guess that next week it is my turn to lead a discussion; and with Colmac having today talked about the dangers of encountering an angry moose, I would like to continue this theme and draw our attention to the dangers presented by

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black bears, particularly if appropriate safety precautions are not taken. Do you mind if we cover this potential danger?”

Thegar responded, “Of course not, Uncle Joe. As always, we will eagerly look forward to hearing about them. Do you think there is any chance of seeing bears at this time of the year?”

Uncle Joe answered, “There are no guarantees, but I think there is a good chance if we visit the far side of the Limberlost property where bears have been sighted quite often this year by your Loon Lake neighbours.”

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Black Bears

Consistent with their discussion the previous week, Uncle Joe suggested they hike to an area on the Limberlost property where bears had been regularly sighted during the summer. While on their hike, they decided to also visit a rocky section of Bauer Park where black bears were known to hibernate for the winter. Uncle Joe undertook to talk to Teda, Colmac and Thegar about the feeding habitats of black bears and what they should do to avoid surprising them; and if they did, what they could do to prevent being attacked by an errant bear.

They first drove to the narrows which joined Turtle Lake with Clear Lake and then walked up the circular trail towards Hickory Lake. Prior to starting their hike, Uncle Joe had reminded them how important it was to attach bear bells to their shoes or belts in the early spring and late fall. This weekend he also brought along a rifle with tranquilizer darts and four bear bangers, since they were going to

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venture closer to bear territory than he would normally recommend. The previous weekend they had made a wide circle around the area they were going to explore today, as he had recently encountered a mother and three fairly mature cubs on the ridge of a rock outcrop that ran parallel to Turtle Lake.

Uncle Joe guided them southward around the rock outcropping to the higher hill tops which lay to the east. They chose a spot at the top of a hill to sit down where they had a fairly unobstructed view of the rock outcrops which were now to the west of them.

Once they had settled themselves, Uncle Joe explained, “I plan to describe the areas where bears are likely to be found, what they eat, how they react to humans and what you should do to protect yourself.”

“It is important that we spend time talking about black bears because there are occasions when they react aggressively, especially when surprised. These attacks are very rare indeed, but they nevertheless do occur, and therefore we should take the appropriate precautions. First, you should learn all you can about their behaviour.”

Colmac commented, “My father has warned us of these dangers and only recently told us about a logger who was working his way through an Ontario forest conducting a tree survey when he was attacked and killed by a black bear. When they investigated the incident, it became clear that the bear had stalked him for some distance, keeping a hundred feet or so to the right of the logger before circling

around and attacking him head on. Although this is supposed to be very unusual, the fact that it did occur requires us to take precautionary measures.”

Uncle Joe replied, “I read about the case. It reminded me of the couple who were camping on an island in Algonquin Park and were foolish enough to leave their food unprotected, probably believing they were safe being on an island. Well, black bears are very strong swimmers and have an extremely keen sense of smell and acute hearing. The bear obviously swam across the lake to the island. The couple were most likely trapped, resulting in the bear killing and devouring parts of them. This was an unusually gruesome attack and as such a clear reminder to all of us to exercise care.”

Thegar commented, “You certainly have our attention Uncle Joe. Would you tell us more about what we need to do to avoid a confrontation and how we should protect ourselves in the event we are ever attacked?”

Uncle Joe answered, “Thegar, I will do precisely that, but first let’s examine some facts. Male black bears vary in size from 250 pounds to 600 pounds. That is very large and hence they are extremely powerful. The females vary in weight from 100 pounds to 400 pounds. In total, there are estimated to be 75,000 to 100,000 black bears in Ontario. The numbers have increased significantly with the cancellation of the former spring bear hunt season. This was done because many cubs were being orphaned, causing them either to starve or be killed by a male bear. Without the pro-

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tection of a mother, the males usually kill off their young.”

“The cubs are generally born in January while their mothers are in their dens. The cubs remain with their mothers for approximately one year and then wonder off on their own. They live a solitary life until the mating season when they pair up.”

Thegar interrupted to mention, “Last year we saw two young bears wandering together from time to time in the vicinity of our cabin, quite regularly over the course of a six week period. They were a good five feet tall and probably weighed more than a hundred pounds each. Why were they together and alone?”

Uncle Joe explained, “They were most likely cubs who had been driven off by their mother soon after the birth of her next offspring. When you saw them they were probably a year or so old. They stuck together because they were scared, however, I bet that they soon learnt how to fend for themselves and eventually went their own separate ways.”

“Let’s talk a bit about their feeding habits. First of all, when they are hibernating they don’t eat or drink anything, and as a result they lose up to half their body weight. It is therefore no wonder that they become pretty grumpy if you surprise them soon after they have left their dens in the early spring. . . .”

Uncle Joe suddenly stopped talking and placed a finger to his lips, indicating that they should be very quiet. He then slowly raised his arm to point across the valley to the middle of the rocky outcrop where something was

moving behind a stand of young hemlock. They sat silent and very still for five minutes or so, other than Uncle Joe who stretched out his arm to pull his tranquilizer gun a little closer to his side.

Then, without warning, a cub came bounding into the valley where it could be clearly seen. A moment later, two other cubs followed the first one into the open.

Uncle Joe whispered, “We will observe for a short while and then head away, because we definitely don’t want to get between the cubs and their mother, and she could be on the other side of this hill looking for food. When I indicate, let’s move quietly around the bottom of the valley and return to the Turtle Lake Trail. We will carry on our discussion at our next stop.”

The next area they visited required a forty minute hike through Bauer Park to the joint-venture lands they held with Aunt Mary on the west side of Eastall Lake.

Walking north, the lake was to the right of them and to their left were many large rocks naturally piled neatly upon each other creating four large rock terraces. Uncle Joe pointed out that the gaps between the rocks provided ideal cavities to serve as winter dens for black bears. By keeping close to the water and by making a fair amount of noise, Uncle Joe explained, there was little chance of coming face to face with a bear.

The terraced rocks were extremely attractive with a solid layer of rich soil having accumulated at their base, permitting fifty or more giant Hemlocks to thrive. The

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rocks themselves resembled an elephant sitting on its haunches, hence the area was known as Elephant Cliffs.

When they reached a small spit of land that protruded into the lake, Uncle Joe suggested they stop for a while and continue their discussion.

He said, “We left off as I was about to talk about the bears’ unique feeding habits. On reflection, I think Thegar should do this instead. I remember reading in his nature journal that he used a word to describe the unique range of food they eat. I had to look the word up in the dictionary. Thegar, do you remember the section I am referring to?”

Thegar was happy to oblige, “Yes, I remember the word. It was omnivorous, meaning they feed on both plants and animals. Approximately 75% of their yearly food intake is from plants, 15% from dead animals and the balance is from insects and small mammals. They clearly love sugar or anything sweet, particularly honey, but also wild blueberries, raspberries and the orange berries produced by mountain ash trees. A tree of even greater significance to black bears is the beech tree, which produces large quantities of nutritional nuts.”

Thegar continued, “Uncle Joe, you mentioned that black bears have a very strong sense of smell. They can easily detect miniscule amounts of leftover food or garbage from a great distance. Therefore, it is inviting trouble to leave food near your tent if you are camping or garbage cans outside your cabin. Also, make sure that if you’re going to feed birds in a wild setting, you should only do this

between December and April, as black bears enjoy birdseed and especially suet. Feeding bears, whether intentionally or not, will teach them to associate food with people. This could very well compromise the safety of both humans and themselves.”

Uncle Joe complemented Thegar, “That was very good, but I must try to remember the word omnivorous. Before we deal with the precautionary measures we should take, I want to identify two other places frequented by bears on the Limberlost property where you should be especially careful during the late fall and early spring.”

“Colmac mentioned one of these places to us when we walked along the Solitaire Trail. It is above the Hidden Cliffs, which are sometimes referred to as the Windy Caves. Higher up, there are numerous openings between the rocks which probably serve as entrances to their dens. The other area is at the bottom of Rebecca Creek, a short distance before it flows under the Limberlost Road into Rebecca Lake. It is also best that you keep clear of this area in the spring.”

“Now, to move on to how to react should you encounter a black bear,” continued Uncle Joe. “First, negative encounters with black bears are usually the result of bears reacting defensively rather than aggressively. This means make sure you don’t panic and scare them. Don’t run, but rather move very slowly away, holding your arms, or better still your hat, or even better your jacket, on a stick high above your head. Remember they have poor eyesight and

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the idea is to make yourself appear bigger than them. Also, don't look a bear in the eyes. That is a threat in the animal kingdom. If it stands up, don't assume it is about to attack, it is probably trying to get a better look at you. If it does attack, fight back by punching and kicking it vigorously, especially at its nose and eyes."

"Avoidance is much more important, therefore make sure you wear your bear bells in the spring and fall, and carry a set of bear bangers, especially if you are wandering close to the areas that we know they often frequent, which includes blueberry and raspberry patches in the late summer."

"We seem to be ending the day on a negative note and that was definitely not my intent. I have probably over done it because of my concern for your safety. Let's remember, black bears are generally timid and go out of their way to avoid encounters with humans. If we do our part, and that means wearing bells or taking a dog along with us, the odds of ever encountering a bear are very slight indeed," concluded Uncle Joe.

"There is one place where you can be assured of seeing black bears, Uncle Joe," said Thegar. "And, that is the district garbage dump. In fact, there is one large bear with a missing right paw that is almost always there."

Uncle Joe agreed, "You are right Thegar, and I don't know why they have not fenced the facility off better. Next time I see the mayor I will speak to him, but for now, it is probably time for us to head home. Why don't we go around

the north end of Eastall Lake and then cut through the park in the hope of coming across that very large Hemlock?”

They all agreed and set off with Teda's bear bell tinkering merrily along with each stride she took.

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Thanks Giving

Uncle Joe had previously suggested that when Thanksgiving arrived they should use the opportunity to reflect on how fortunate they were to be exposed to so many exceptional people – at home, at school, through their father’s business and especially the people they met through the Limberlost Forest & Wildlife Reserve.

Uncle Joe reminded them that it is generally believed that an individual’s environment is the major factor in determining character. He claimed that, “In your early years you are likely to assimilate the traits of the people you spend the most time with, although some believe that your genetics also have something to do with what you become. As you mature, you do, however, have the ability to be more discriminating, and to consciously seek out different role models and mentors to learn from.”

“It is not only individuals you learn from,” Uncle Joe

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continued. “I believe that by living in peace in the wilderness, you come to appreciate the ways of the animals, which in my case have taught me patience and have helped me understand other people and their needs.”

This discussion led them to agreeing that they should set aside time to try and identify the personal character traits they admired the most in their friends and families, and then determine how best to adopt them in their own lives. It was left to Teda, Colmac and Thegar to collectively pick five personal character traits and then prepare themselves to discuss their merits and the potential impact they have had, or could in the future potentially have, on their lives.

Uncle Joe encouraged them to confine their choices to the character traits that could positively affect their daily lives. He suggested that they leave traits such as leadership, integrity, decency and resourcefulness to a later discussion they would have relating to their future careers.

They agreed that the Thanksgiving lunch that Uncle Joe had offered to prepare would be an appropriate time to conduct their discussion. The lunch was to be served in his cabin and would be comprised solely of food gathered on the Limberlost property.

The following week when Teda, Colmac and Thegar arrived at Uncle Joe’s cabin, lunch was ready to be placed on the large wooden table. Uncle Joe insisted on waiting on them. For the next hour and a half they worked their way through a thistle salad, a blueberry soup, lake trout

and beaver tails for the less faint of heart – namely Colmac and Uncle Joe – all of which was washed down with a tasty apple cider.

When challenged, Uncle Joe was adamant that the apples also came from the area and reminded them of the old orchard they had seen in Bauer Park. “I managed to collect sufficient apples before the birds and deer got to them. I then added plenty of maple syrup to speed up the process and a few other things which shall remain unmentioned.”

“Which one of you will kick off our discussion on character traits?” asked Uncle Joe. “I assume you will take it in turns, but remember it gets tougher as we go on.”

Teda volunteered to begin, “I will start. The particular trait I have chosen is one I admire in *you*, Uncle Joe!”

“You have a very positive disposition, and I suggest that this is an essential character trait to develop in order to be successful. People who exude a positive attitude tend to encourage other people to feel better about themselves. Part of being positive is learning to suppress anger, which in any event is highly unproductive and inevitably hurtful towards others.”

Thegar interrupted Teda to contribute, “I recall reading a saying which basically said that being positive involves seeing the invisible, feeling the intangible and believing you can achieve the impossible. I made a point of remembering this saying because it reminds me of our father’s urging to be more positive and always make an extra effort, and that if we did this we could achieve almost anything.”

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Colmac added, “I agree; people who have a positive attitude are naturally cheerful and more constructive about the things they do, and this gives them a much better chance of bringing others along to help them achieve their goals.”

Teda continued, “Not only are positive people more grateful for what they have, they are generally trying to improve themselves and those around them. It seems that it is their nature to share generously with others and this includes sharing the responsibility for setbacks. Also, when setbacks do occur, rather than feeling sorry for themselves they take steps to address the cause of them.”

There was a pause in the conversation, which gave Uncle Joe an opportunity to comment, “First, I agree that having a positive attitude should be right at the top of your list, and second, your comments around the subject have been excellent. Third, I have observed that positive people usually find it easier to laugh at themselves, which adds to their enjoyment of life and helps those around them to relax.”

After much further discussion and comparisons of people with positive and negative attitudes, Uncle Joe asked, “Colmac, why don’t we move on and you tell us what you consider to be the next most important character trait?”

Colmac quickly responded, “My suggestion has many similar consequences. I have chosen graciousness, partly because I have in the past been accused of being too adamant and I want to show that I’ve come to learn the impor-

tance of being gracious.”

“When I think of graciousness I think of kindness, decency and being forgiving. This includes setting aside grievances and avoiding condemning judgments. Practicing graciousness helps others deal with their fears and put painful experiences behind them.”

“Being gracious requires good judgment as it is important to learn from each experience. You can’t learn and grow if you are ungracious and bitter. Being ungracious, you are also likely to offend others, which could negatively impact your career or a business relationship in the future.”

“It is much easier to be gracious when you think of all the wonderful things you are blessed with – your health, your home, your family, true friends, your educational opportunities, and if you are doubly fortunate, your family’s financial well being.”

Uncle Joe remarked, “All I can add is that I have found that being gracious in my dealings with others, virtually always results in them being decent towards me. It also strengthens the respect earned from them, making it more likely that they will offer their help, should I have need for it.”

They all concurred that graciousness was certainly deserving of being one of the five principal character traits that they should each aspire to develop. Further discussion on the topic centred on making sure that being gracious was not misinterpreted by misguided individuals as a sign of weakness, and thus encouraging them to take advantage.

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Thegar, sensing that they had exhausted the topic, offered to present his choice of a desirable character trait. “I would have chosen reliability as my first pick, but knowing Teda feels so strongly about this trait, being Miss Reliability herself, therefore, I have instead decided to talk about the merits of friendship. Uncle Joe, do you agree that this should rank highly as a desirable character trait?”

Uncle Joe promptly assured Thegar, “Yes, of course. We are eager to hear your views on the subject. Being a good family member probably also involves many of the attributes of being a true friend and I hope we talk about that as well. Go right ahead Thegar.”

“I will start with friends,” responded Thegar. “First, true friends can always be counted on to help each other and they will stand by and be supportive even when it is unpopular to do so. They will also put their friends’ interests ahead of theirs.”

“Second, true friends never keep score. They don’t ask or expect anything in return for the help they provide. They will also watch out for their friends’ families if something should happen to them.”

“Third, they have learned to interpret their friends’ actions and words, and by doing so, they understand their friends’ needs. As a result, they intuitively know when their friends would like them to be near, and when they wish to be left alone.”

Thegar went on, “In my mind, those three points distinguish a true friend from an ordinary friend. I remember

early on, Uncle Joe cautioning us that many people may call themselves friends, but that true friendships are developed over long periods, involving sharing a variety of interests and experiences together. Uncle Joe, you invited us to do just that, and I feel every time we meet we cement our friendship even further. I hope you feel the same?”

Uncle Joe immediately responded, “Thegar, I definitely feel that way. I believe we have struck a deep friendship. I know you are very loyal people and that I can trust you to be responsive to my concerns. I also know that you would never intentionally do anything to be hurtful. It is wonderful for an old man like myself to feel this way about such young people as you. I feel very fortunate indeed.”

Colmac was quick to respond, “We certainly feel exceptionally fortunate to have met you Uncle Joe, and are extremely thankful for your willingness to teach us so much. You can count on us to always be there for you, as true friends should.”

Colmac turned to Thegar to add, “Returning to your description of a true friend, you omitted to mention that for families to be successful, family members have to also be good friends. The trust and mutual support expected of true friends is also expected of family members, particularly when they are faced with challenging problems.”

Uncle Joe picked-up on this, saying, “I agree Colmac. It is very easy for family members to develop petty jealousies and be critical of each other. Family members, as true friends, should strive to be generous to each other in both

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words and deeds. This is the only way for a family to be successful in protecting what they collectively own, namely their good name and what their parents have accomplished for their mutual benefit. Being united and supportive of each other enables so much more to be accomplished, rather than pulling in different directions.”

Teda, sensing the discussion on true friends was sufficient, stated, “That probably leads into the next character trait we have chosen and Thegar has already pinned it on me. I truly feel that reliability is an important character trait. I view a reliable person as one who delivers what they promise within the time period expected. They make sure they can provide for themselves and not become a burden on others. They are capable of limiting their needs in order to respond to challenging situations. I know of no one who fits this definition better than you, Uncle Joe.”

Teda continued, “In trying to determine what is required to be a reliable person, I believe it is essential to have sound values, which can be drawn on to provide strength when difficulties arise. True friends and solid family relationships, as we discussed a moment ago, also provide stable foundations to our lives, which gives us confidence in making promises and knowing that one way or another we will keep or exceed them. Uncle Joe, I am sure keen to hear your insights, because you are the epitome of a self-reliant person, capable of surviving on your own in the wilderness and known in the community as a person to look to for help when help is needed.”

Uncle Joe responded, “Those are very kind sentiments Teda. Well, I believe that to enhance your reliability it is essential to learn from each experience in order to avoid making costly mistakes over again. Second, reliable people are usually adept at dealing very quickly with setbacks, and thereby reduce the likelihood of them escalating into larger problems.”

Colmac added, “I think that to be truly reliable you also need to work hard at building long-term financial security. This may require making short-term sacrifices, which is something many people are not prepared to do. If you don’t have control over your own life, others cannot safely rely on you to fulfill your commitments.”

“Those are very good points Colmac,” praised Uncle Joe. “Who is now going to put forward the next desirable character trait?”

“Thegar is going to cover it,” responded Teda. “We asked him to talk about self-esteem because he has always been comfortable in talking with anyone, including strangers, which generally reflects a high degree of self-esteem. Thegar, why don’t you start?”

“Well, I did some recent reading on the subject and concluded that to have self-esteem, the most important requirement was to be comfortable with yourself. I think Teda is being generous with her comments about me, because there are a whole lot of things that scare me. I don’t know yet if I can meet all the expectations others have of me, and therefore I have a long way to go before I can feel

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totally comfortable with myself.”

“The best way, at least as it seems to me, to build self-esteem is to determine what we admire in others and then adopt these traits for ourselves. By doing this you hope that the people you respect the most will judge you more favourably. Self-esteem usually helps you find goodness in most things you encounter, which in turn should bring out the best in those around you.”

“I also read that to establish self-esteem, it is important to intuitively recognize the distinction between what is good and what is bad, and also the distinction between being good and being nice. While it is important to be both good and nice, some people are very capable of being nice to win your approval, but this does not qualify them as being good people.”

“Thegar, that was excellent,” said Uncle Joe. “The only comment I would add is that the pleasure that flows from finding goodness in others can be expressed in many ways – a smile, shared laughter or a helpful hand. Showing your pleasure is a wonderful thing to do for others and it will come back to you in many ways, compounding your own joy.”

“Thegar, you have helped us finish on a very positive note,” continued Uncle Joe. “That being said, it is time for all of you to get back to Dragons Tongue for your second Thanksgiving dinner, which your mother and Aunt Mary should be serving in less than an hour.”

“There is one thing I am sure of Uncle Joe,” added

Teda. “And that is, we have never had any other meal to top this one for the amount of guidance that has been passed on by you to us. You have certainly made us think about what we need to work on to be better people. Thank you, again and again, Uncle Joe. You have given us so much to be grateful for.”

“Well, thank you Teda,” responded Uncle Joe. “I have told you how equally grateful I am, and to mark this special Thanksgiving Day I have carved you two falcons in flight, clutching a fish with their claws entwined. I know how much you enjoyed the carving of Ollie the Owl, so I set out to do something a lot more ambitious. Come on out to the back of the cabin and see if you can take it with you.”

The carving was even finer in detail than the statue of the owl. Thegar was quick to run his hands over it, exclaiming, “It is magnificent Uncle Joe. We will place it at the entrance to our cabin. Thank you so very much!”

Teda and Colmac also expressed their profuse thanks and eagerly carried the wood carving to Uncle Joe’s boat as the first stop in its journey to their cabin.

In parting, Uncle Joe said, “Tomorrow it is my turn to continue our discussion on character traits, particularly those which may be relevant to your future dealings in the commercial world or any other vocation. I know I will be challenged to match your contributions today, for which I must thank you very much!”

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Leadership Traits

As the holiday weekend was coming to an end and the cooler fall weather was rapidly setting in, Uncle Joe suggested that they take the opportunity to meet again at High Lake early on Sunday morning. Uncle Ted had recently upgraded the access road, and had helped Colmac build a small rest cabin on the west side of the lake. In the process of doing so, Colmac had learnt a great deal about basic construction, as well as fine carpentry.

Inside the new cabin was a small wood stove, which visiting fishermen and hikers were free to use to warm themselves during the fall and winter seasons. It would serve the same purpose for the four of them, as it was a fairly cool morning.

They met at the Limberlost barn and took a leisurely walk along the woodland road to the High Lake trail entrance; and from there to the cabin. With many of the

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leaves having already fallen from the underbrush, they were able to assess the health of the trees in the different forest stands they passed along the way.

On arriving at the cabin, Thegar promptly got a fire going and Teda set about making tea to go with their biscotti biscuits. In addition, they had the sandwiches Aunt Mary had insisted on making, using the leftovers from the previous evening's meal.

Leaving little time for small talk, Uncle Joe started their discussion by stating that he would talk generally about what he believed was required to build a successful career, and would then deal more specifically with earning a reputation for being a resourceful worker, proficient builder, loyal partner and an inspirational leader. He mentioned that they should think of these as rungs on a ladder towards achieving success in their chosen careers.

“I will be drawing mainly on my own experience as the owner of a small construction company, which entailed a number of partnership arrangements. In addition, I have attempted throughout my life to study others, in search of a common thread to their success.”

“As with many of our previous discussions, I have tried to identify the most important qualities, which for these purposes I have summarized into ten brief guidelines.”

“First, business can be a very satisfying profession when practiced diligently with a sense of fairness and integrity, no matter how strong the hand you hold.”

“Second, encourage teamwork, since ordinary people working together with common goals will always do better than even the most accomplished super-achievers who go their own ways.”

“Third, do your homework thoroughly and think out all the alternatives before committing to a major course of action. In sports terms, practice hard and play easy.”

“Fourth, be willing to take calculated risks, since the returns are likely to be higher, and in any event you will benefit, provided you learn from your mistakes.”

“Fifth, never bet everything, no matter how confident you are. It is better to achieve less and stay in the game with a strong hand than to be reckless and hope for the big win, and instead find yourself no longer able to participate.”

“Sixth, be relentless in pursuing your convictions, even when these are contrary to what others are thinking and doing, while remembering to always be respectful of others as you proceed.”

“Seventh, share credit and rewards generously, allocating both where they can do the most good for the organization as a whole, and always deliver difficult messages to those who have fallen short, the same way as you would like to receive them.”

“Eighth, protect your reputation as it is even more important than your professional skills and accomplishments, and never allow arrogance to develop, for it tends to feed on itself. Also be wary of large egos since they are not

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compatible with teamwork and sharing credit.”

“Ninth, always endeavour to create a good first impression, whether it is about yourself or the product you are dealing with. One of the toughest things about business is getting a foot in the door, and your appearance and attitude are critical to achieving this. In addition, as previously discussed, delivering on the expectations you leave is, of course, essential. Remember, if you miss every second chance because of a wrong first impression, how can you ever expect to be successful?”

“Tenth, share your success by being generous to the community in which you live, for it takes many people and institutions to get you from where you are to where you may want to go.”

Teda thanked Uncle Joe for sharing with them the guidelines he felt were useful to follow in order to have a successful career, and then asked, “Uncle Joe, would you please leave us a copy of your notes so that I can make sure to record them properly. I imagine it is something like a puzzle. If one rule is not followed or is broken, it can all fall apart, and instead of success there will be failure.”

“Of course you can have my notes,” promised Uncle Joe, “but remember; there are no assured rules for success. Others will have their own. These ones have worked for me. Your father’s guidelines may be quite different. Try to learn from as many people as possible and then common sense will tell you what is right for you in your chosen profession and circumstances.”

Uncle Joe continued, “The second last guideline I mentioned relates to creating a positive first impression and then delivering on the expectations you’ve created. If you do this enough times, you will become known – so to speak – as an achiever; and people will use this, or some other label, to describe you. The better the label, the more opportunities you will have.”

Teda asked, “Is that the same, for example, as having a good reputation for being reliable?”

“It is definitely so,” answered Uncle Joe. “More frequently, people are referring to this as your brand. Remember that most successful people are very busy and they don’t have the time to check everything out; so they like to deal with people, or businesses which they know have good reputations, or buy products that are known for their quality.”

“I encourage you, from the start of your career, to do everything you can to earn the label of being an achiever or resourceful worker. As you progress, aim to be known as a proficient builder, creating systems and structures or shared values in the organization where you work, rather than someone who is just doing their job. The next step is to become a valued partner, and remember that you can do a whole lot more working and sharing fairly with others. Ultimately you should aim to be an inspired leader, which will require you to lead by example, being knowledgeable, capable of exercising good judgment, being loyal to your colleagues and attracting people equally proficient or better

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than yourself, so you in turn can keep learning.”

“You are very fortunate to have your parents and many other capable people around you to help you explore these concepts a lot better than I am capable of explaining, and I encourage you to do this over the winter. If you wish we can then talk about this subject further next summer,” concluded Uncle Joe.

Colmac responded, “This discussion is very timely Uncle Joe, because our school counselors as well as our father and his colleagues keep nudging us to think more about our future careers and, I guess, we have tended to defer doing so. It is clear that you are not going to let us get away with avoiding the issue, and I am sure for good reason.”

Uncle Joe concluded the discussion with, “Colmac, you have got the message and that is probably enough for today. We can return again to the subject sometime next year when you are ready and have thought more about it.”

Teda added, “I guess this discussion is also intended to remind us again about how fortunate we are and that we should not waste the opportunities we have, and no doubt that is what Thanksgiving weekends are meant to be about.”

“You are right on the money!” said Uncle Joe. “Now let’s head along the other side of High Lake and inspect the work you did on the trail last summer. I’m looking forward to seeing it and the new camp site you have laid out.”

Thegar interjected, “Uncle Joe, before we start our

hike, and with it being Thanksgiving, we figured it was appropriate to express our thanks by giving you a gift. It is a copy of a poem given to us by our father early last year. Colmac used birch branches to frame it and then burnt the symbols on the frame, which he claims resemble pictographs that he found in the cave on the east side of Lake Solitaire as well as below the Echo Rock cliffs.”

Glancing at the poem, Uncle Joe proclaimed, “Thank you so much! Thegar, would you be so kind as to read it to us?”

Thegar quickly responded, “I will do better than that. I had the morning to brush up on the words and therefore I will instead try to recite it for you. However, at the outset I must say that to Teda’s chagrin it refers to ‘my sons’ and not daughters. My father insists that we always point out that it refers to sons only because he could not make it flow properly any other way. Here is his version of *The Law of the Land*.”

*Now this is the law of the land, my Sons,
As old and as true as the hills;
And those that keep it will prosper, my Sons,
While those that abuse it, it kills.*

*Unlike the laws of man, my Sons,
This law never tolerates slack;
What you take from the land, my Sons,
You have got to put back.*

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*Remember you hold this land in trust, my Sons,
And that we must all eventually pass away;
Treasure and safeguard this gift, my Sons,
Till the dawn of your Judgment Day.*

*To plunder and rob the land, my Sons,
Is to forsake our family's trust;
I know today that you are worthy, my Sons,
And that you will always be straight and just.*

*Many who came before you, my Sons,
Took freely, hoping to make good;
They trampled and exposed the earth, my Sons,
Taking whatever they could.*

*But erosion came creeping slowly, my Sons,
Then hastened on with a rush;
The streams ran dry and the wildlife left, my Sons,
Which caused everyone to suffer so much.*

*Those bad old ways must go, my Sons,
There is much you need to do;
Develop your forests and trails with care, my Sons,
For we are all counting on you.*

*To cleanse and protect your land, my Sons,
Will require time, care and caution;
Always teach and practice safety, my Sons,
For there is no other viable option.*

*The beavers must build dams again, my Sons,
For their meadows add much to the soil;
Contour the land and bridge the streams, my Sons,
There's virtue in sweat and toil.*

*Hearken the sounds of birds in the trees, my Sons,
For this will warm your heart and soul;
Selectively harvest the woods, my Sons,
For it's part of once again making nature whole.*

*Make space for the bears and the wolves, my Sons,
All God's creatures have a role to play;
They are part of nature's balance, my Sons,
So don't let them be driven away.*

*With your help the land will heal itself, my Sons,
Once the plundering ways are long gone;
Then the joys of nature will return, my Sons,
Thanks to your job being well done.*

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*Never ask a fortune of your land, my Sons,
True pride is much greater to behold;
Protect, conserve and improve, my Sons,
Learn this well before you grow old.*

*Now this is the law of the land, my Sons,
What you take out you've got to put back;
Then you'll find your life very full, my Sons,
When it's time to shoulder your pack.*

“Thegar, you recited the poem beautifully and perfectly!” exclaimed Uncle Joe. “The words are music to my ears. They highlight so well the damage done in the past to the northern wilderness, the restoration now under way, and they capture the respect you have for wildlife and what still needs to be accomplished.”

“Perhaps, most important,” continued Uncle Joe. “It also records your father’s unequivocal endorsement of you as worthy custodians of the land. I will treasure this gift and see if I can learn to recite the words myself. Now let’s head out and admire your trail work.”

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Return to Echo Rock

The fall arrived far too soon for Uncle Joe and his three eager students. Individually they had each wished that the summer of 2003 would have continued indefinitely.

The days grew shorter, the temperatures dropped and the leaves changed their colours. The first flurries of snow appeared. As much as Teda, Colmac and Thegar tried to resist thinking about it, they instinctively knew that the time had arrived to return to Echo Rock to reflect on what they had learnt and to seek Uncle Joe's further guidance.

They felt very fortunate to have met Uncle Joe and extremely honoured that he had devoted so much of his time in sharing with them his vast knowledge of the wilderness and personal views on life.

Fortunately, on the weekend they chose to return to Echo Rock the sun was bright, which helped to compensate for the drop in temperature. However, to provide additional

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protection against the cold, Teda packed blankets, toques and gloves for everyone in two large backpacks.

The four of them were unusually quiet during the hike to Echo Rock, partly because none of them wanted their weekly visits to end. They were also deeply concerned that Uncle Joe's doctor had insisted that he spend the next five months with a cousin in Florida. He had reluctantly accepted this because he wanted to remain in good health in order to enjoy many more summers with his new-found friends.

When they approached the turn off to the Echo Rock lookout, Colmac asked Uncle Joe if he minded if they took a somewhat circuitous route to the lookout as they wished to show him a remarkable discovery they had made the previous day.

Uncle Joe was quick to agree, but enquired of Colmac, "It must be something of great importance for you to be so excited? Are you going to tell me now or is it to be a surprise?"

"Please let it be a surprise Uncle Joe," begged Thegar. "What I can tell you is that it is not a tree, nor a bird nest or animal den. It is none of the things we have been discussing, but yet it is very symbolic that we should have found it at this time."

Uncle Joe, being the good sport that he was, asked no further questions as they proceeded southward, steadily climbing to the highest point on the Solitaire Trail.

When they reached the top, Colmac stopped them to

announce, “Uncle Joe, you will remember when we talked about trail building, we agreed that trails should have points of interest for visitors to enjoy. Well, we have to amend the Solitaire Trail Guide because yesterday we made a stupendous discovery!”

“We had been working our way through the wetlands which drain into McReynolds Lake, searching for a route to extend a road to Eastall Lake, when a friend and I decided to leave my father and Thegar in order to climb eastward up the valley towards Solitaire. I wanted to familiarize myself better with this area as it seems to be an active deer run and wintering ground. I was less than fifty feet from reaching the Solitaire Trail when I stumbled on a large quartz rock. Only the very tip was showing, but it took very little time to clear off the leaves to reveal a three foot boulder and then another and another. Three large quartz boulders.”

“I rushed back to our cabin just as my father and Thegar were returning. I was so excited that they agreed to return to the site as quickly as possible. While I was showing the boulders to my father, Thegar went exploring himself, using his feet to clear off leaves and loose earth from every raised mound he could find.”

“As Thegar was kicking his way up the hill, looking down at the ground, he virtually stumbled into the giant quartz outcrop I am pointing at on the far side of the path. From here, it looks like any other granite outcrop, which it certainly did especially yesterday before we pulled the moss and earth away from it. Isn't it amazing? It's bigger

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than a large truck. Teda called it the mother-load.”

Uncle Joe walked up to the quartz outcrop, which had been sufficiently cleared of its previous covering so that it glistened brightly in the sunlight. He was clearly taken aback, and immediately exclaimed, “I have never seen anything like it. It is beautiful! And, you are absolutely correct, it will add another wonderful feature to encourage visitors to Limberlost to use the Solitaire Trail. It is a fantastic sight. Congratulations to all of you!”

Instead of retracing their steps, they cut across the plateau that formed the top of the Echo Rock Cliffs to reach the lookout. There, they planned to sit down and reflect on the events of the summer.

On arriving at the Echo Rock lookout, Teda spread the blankets in a sunny spot that was well sheltered by large rocks. After making themselves comfortable, they sat for a long while in silence, staring out over the lake, taking in the beautiful bright red, orange, yellow and green colours of the fall.

Teda was the first to break the silence, saying, “Uncle Joe, we can never thank you properly for the most wonderful summer anyone could imagine. We want you to know that our family’s cabin on Lake Solitaire is always available for you to use. Thegar has had a key made so that when the weather is too bad for you to get to your own cabin, we want you to feel free to make yourself at home at Dragons Tongue. Our parents also insist on you doing this.”

Uncle Joe started to protest, but Teda was determined

to say her piece. She put her hand up in a gesture to Uncle Joe to allow her to continue, which she promptly did. “Next, it is important that you know that we are unanimous in believing that the pirate hoard on Helve Lake belongs in its entirety to you. We can’t explain why we were so presumptuous in feeling that we had any rights to any part of it merely because Thegar stumbled on its hiding place.”

“What you have given us, is so much more valuable than all the treasures in the world. You have opened our eyes to the wilderness in a way we could never have imagined. You have taught us so many values about life, which we will carry with us forever. You have also taught us the importance of distinguishing right from wrong, and to being patient in judging others. I could go on and on with the many other things for which we have reason to thank you.”

Colmac and Thegar were equally eloquent and expansive in expressing their thanks.

Uncle Joe was clearly overwhelmed and with watery eyes, he spoke quietly, “That’s enough now. I came here today to thank all of you. You are the ones who have given me a tremendous new lease on life. I look forward to next summer, and the next and the next. That is a wonderful feeling to have for someone of my age. It is like I am at the beginning of a new life and that is all due to the three of you.”

Together they gave Uncle Joe a big hug, and he in return embraced them with equal warmth. He then said,

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“Before we spend the whole day thanking each other, and remember I am reputed to be a man of very few words, we have some business to conduct, and then I have an important matter to report to you.”

“First, each of you has passed your worthiness test with flying colours, exceeding the most optimistic expectations I had following our first meeting at the beginning of the spring. You are extremely worthy custodians of Limberlost and for that matter any other wilderness property you may acquire or have the opportunity to manage. You have a deep understanding and respect for nature, and the journal Teda helped us to assemble definitely conveys that.”

“This brings me to my second point. I was informed a month or so ago that we won an award for the long wilderness article we prepared together for *The International Wildlife Journal*. Because of the award, excerpts were republished in hundreds of British and European newspapers. More on that later. I decided to save this news for this special day.”

“Next, I have made up my mind about the pirate hoard; and remember I have a reputation for also being stubborn, so don’t even try to argue with me. It should be used to help fulfill the dream Thegar shared with me at our very first meeting. Perhaps next summer we could start exposing less fortunate individuals to the wonders of the wilderness reserve, that is, if this remains your family’s wishes. For the next while it is probably best left exactly

where it is now.”

Colmac started to protest that at a minimum some of the coins should be used to pay for an all-weather road to Uncle Joe’s cabin and to do a number of other things to make his life easier, but Uncle Joe would not have any part of it. Eventually, however, he agreed that perhaps next summer they could all assist him in upgrading the trail from Helve Lake to his cabin so that he could at least use a snow mobile to reach his cabin when Little Twin Lake was not sufficiently frozen to enable him to travel across the ice. With this small victory, the subject was dropped and left for another day.

“Now for even bigger news,” said Uncle Joe, clearly beaming as he spoke. “The publication of those nature articles and the fact that they traced my heritage back to my great-great Uncle Archibald MacTeer, led to a stranger in Scotland sending me a letter. Teda, why don’t you read it to us?”

Teda opened the letter, remembering the day only seven months earlier when her brothers gave her another letter, only a short distance down the lake from where they sat today. She began reading:

Dear Mr. MacTeer. I was intrigued by the nature articles on the Canadian wilderness that appeared over the past three weeks in our local newspaper. Many years ago my father was given a box of old papers from a friend of his which contained what some had thought was an old treasure map and a journal of searches made for the treasure over a twenty year

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period. The map is signed by Archibald MacTavish, who is no doubt the same gentleman you referred to in your articles, which I incidentally found very interesting. Since it appears he may be a relative of yours, I am enclosing the papers, however, I humbly ask that if you ever locate the treasure, you grant me a one-tenth interest in it. Yours truly, Joan Higgs.

Thegar interrupted, “Wow! It certainly is a very small world and someone up there is sure thinking of you Uncle Joe. The rumours of the second treasure may be true after all and now there is a map to prove it. We are probably the best people in the world to interpret the map. Uncle Joe, you are always full of pleasant surprises!”

“I must say, I was taken aback when I read the letter, because we made no mention of a treasure or my uncle being a reformed pirate in our articles,” responded Uncle Joe. “My thoughts are exactly the same as yours Thegar, but I guess we should not get our hopes up too high. One thing is for sure, we are going to have many more interesting and busy summers in the years to come !”