



Chris Rurik, KP News

On Foot, Deep in Rocky Creek Preserve

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As I haul on my boots, it's hard to know what to expect. From the muddy pullout where we've parked, an overgrown road leads into low, tangled woods. It's December. Even the blackberries look the worse for wear.

It would be easy to write a glowing nature piece about the heart of Key Peninsula's newest protected area, Great Peninsula Conservancy's Rocky Creek Preserve, where the creek plunges among mudbanks strewn with salmon, and bald eagles glide and swerve through moss-covered trees. I went there. It was spectacular.

But this foolhardy naturalist has a thing for deep tangles. So I'm setting out with Nate Daniel, GPC's executive director, to penetrate the upper reaches of this 150-acre landscape.

Despite the help of local historians as quick as minutemen, all I know of its past are the names of homesteaders and the deed for an original 160-acre homestead. No telling when it was last logged, a question I often find myself asking on a peninsula where no land is untouched and most forest ecosystems, having once been clearcut, are determined by the age of their trees.

The overgrown road squelches underfoot. We cross a creek. Soon a wall of thin firs appears on our right. Too dark for Douglas fir, I realize. Grand fir. We duck into them. The ground is moss and a few bonelike coral mushrooms. Nate

remembers that an abandoned Christmas tree farm is supposed to be in here somewhere. This must be part of it.

But it's not 10 trees deep before we're looking into a tangle of maple, alder and salmonberry around another branch of the creek. We go back to the road, which soon narrows into a trail. Mixed conifers rise and lean around us. Again and again we leave the trail to investigate mushrooms, hillsides, hollows, natural artifacts. Clues. We find a mint-like plant with leaves painted in three shades of gray. An escaped garden plant, we agree. Too beautiful.

We slide down an embankment to a wide creek that plunges over logs and through clear pools. There's a wonderful clarity to the forest here, a musicality. We find a fallen maple limb and inspect it, this bit of world that once lived in the sky: mosses, tiny mushrooms, a fern that we agree must be licorice fern. The knobby rhizomes are bitter, gritty, with maybe just a hint of licorice in there.

A large pool blocks our progress, and anyway we've been noticing a swath of sky in the forest above. After crossing several outflow creeks we find a series of stepped pools held in shape by curved berms of earth. Though we do not see fresh signs of beaver, their engineering work was built to last. Then a vista opens below us. Massive backlit maples, their edges glowing with moss, lean over a wide ravine. A growing creek falls in the distance. It's about as magnificent of a view as you can have in deep forest.

We push into the upland beyond. A

game trail brings us to a stand of small firs. Between them is the utterly smashed carcass of an ancient car, its metal bent back like flower petals. We take it in. How in the world did it get here?

Nearby, a mixed flock of birds leads us onto a trail that widens to a double-track, pinches in again, and brings us to an opening. Scotch broom and huckleberry grow among alders and old cherry trees. Foxglove and bracken fern crowd the edges. A home once stood here. Now fox sparrows call in richly varied brush. One day it will be forest again.

Nate and I have walked, waded, crawled and squeezed our way here. Every yard of progress has brought a change in our surroundings — microhabitats and plant communities speaking of all that has happened in this landscape, the homesteaders, beavers, car-dumpers, tree-planters and wind gusts knocking maple limbs to the ground. That I thought I could get a sense of what we would find by learning the land's logging history probably says something about how I've been trained by this culture of ours to think of forests as plantations, one interchangeable with another, like the parts in machines.

A naturalist should not begin his work with theory, as an economist might. We are trained instead in the art of noticing. Nature shifts and morphs through disturbance and change of all kinds, often thriving, and landscapes carry stories even when history's specifics have been lost. Stories, unlike statistics, play out in certain topographic arrangements,

ABOUT THE SITE

Great Peninsula Conservancy plans to treat Rocky Creek Preserve as one of its new Land Lab sites, meaning it will be a center for community science projects, primarily with students. For example, trail cameras installed by students will provide glimpses of the preserve's nocturnal wildlife. Summer 2022 groundbreaking is planned for a simple public trail system. Additional staff and AmeriCorps VISTA members will design the Land Lab; there will be opportunities for the public to provide input on the trail system, volunteer as local trail stewards and help raise funds for public access.

Current access is limited to a pullout on the south side of 132nd Street NW off Wright-Bliss Road, just west of 175th Ave NW, where a sign describes how to walk a short access road into the preserve.

Into the
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where each turn of fate matters. This landscape could only exist here.

Still we've only seen a corner of the preserve. Again we hear water. Though it's near solstice and we don't have much daylight left, we dream again of following a creek to where the salmon spawn. A weedy road takes us to the lip of a ravine. Below, another branch of Rocky Creek jumps through rocks and ferns; a log shines in the water. Crouched above it, we are forced to admit that its undercut banks and deep pools would make it impossible to follow. We stay for a while. It's another magnificent spot.

Only when we stand to go do we realize that across the ravine the road continues, though it is camouflaged with young trees. The log in the water is actually a concrete culvert snapped in half and spun to an odd angle. We shake our heads. Where have 30 vertical feet of roadbed gone?

Nature has a way of working away toward its ends: trees, moss, stone, clear water carrying food to young salmon. Pockets of habitat. Stories unfolding. Here, removed from the fickleness of man's projects, it will continue to do just that. ■