

Field Notes – Summer 2021

Hopkins Forest: *a Pandemic Love Affair*

I fell in love with Hopkins Forest over the course of a pandemic year. We first met last March, on one of those odd days when we students knew we were being sent home, but lingered in the Berkshires. Though I was a junior, well over halfway into my time at Williams, I had never been to the forest before. I drove up, wandered the Rosenberg Center in a daze, was introduced to Drew but probably didn't shake his hand, then dashed off to eat takeout and say more goodbyes.

June came around, and after a disorienting suburban lockdown, I carried myself back to Williamstown. It is so easy to love the forest in summer. The air is heady and sweet, the green is so green. I walked the lower loop collecting sticks for a wobbly garden fence. I sweated & panted through afternoon runs under the trees and set up a makeshift office at the picnic table most mornings. Empty of students, the research plots were still tended and the waterbars dug by a loyal few. I watched the forest change. It was the landscape that held me during those mid-pandemic months -- witness to anxiety and tenderness and dizzy joy. Saying goodbye (again) in August was a weepy affair.



I was gone from the Berkshires during the fall, taking classes as a remote student—another unexpected twist of my time at Williams. And I was nervous to come back in February, to a place I knew so intimately but also did not know anymore. I met an alien grey-ish landscape, beautiful in its own way, but empty of the buzzing life I had come to love.

After seven semesters of not knowing what I was missing, I began work as a Hopkins Forest Caretaker this spring. I remember my first or second shift, a Monday afternoon, and I got home

around 4:40 pm just as the light was fading. It had been snowing all day, and my fingers were freezing, and I couldn't stop thinking about the sugar bush. Enthralled by the magic of turning sap into syrup, I had heaped Drew with questions about the maples in the forest. What environmental factors determined the trees' output, or the length of the season, or the sugar content of the sap? The fickle climate of early spring in New England plays a crucial part: temperatures that are warm during the day but below freezing at night create a freeze/thaw cycle that causes sap to flow into our buckets. Too warm or too cold, and the flow of sap falters.

But I was surprised to learn that the sugar content had already been determined *last summer*. During those days of heady abundance when the maples soaked up sunlight and water to create a simple sugar molecule—plant food—which was converted into starch and stored through the winter. The sugars that would make the syrup sweet had formed months ago. In my wintry state of mind, feeling worlds away from summer, this was a revelation. Springtime sweetness was the product of last summer's abundances and hardships. Those things that I had stored away were in me still; they had over-wintered. Under the right conditions they would flow.

This is my last semester at Williams, and time is moving strangely. February feels like forever ago, and there were cold afternoons when the loneliness stretched out long ahead of me, but March and April happened overnight, and we're rushing headlong into another summertime. The last of this season's syrup has been bottled up—and it sweetened my coffee this morning. Watching the landscape become green again, I now know I am seeing the chlorophyll that will absorb the sunlight that will create the sugars that will bring sweetness to next year's batch. Thus maple sugaring offers itself up to me, generously, as metaphor, but also as a magic potion for my fridge. To last me until the next season.

-Isabel Cushing '21, Hopkins Forest Caretaker
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