

ECOLOGICAL PAYDAYS

Tate Carter—Department of Biology

Editor's note: These anecdotes illustrate Tate's ecological pedagogy.

I have a payday when students come to me the next semester or later and say something like, “Brother Carter, you’ve ruined me. I can’t even walk across campus without looking at the plants, birds, and so on without trying to identify them. All my roommates think I know everything when we go for a drive and I am telling them, “That is a... Oh, look, there is a...” Here is an e-mail I got from one of my students this summer:

Because of your class, I have become known to my friends and roommates as a flower nerd. Occasionally they will bring me a flower or picture of a flower, asking for it to be identified. Thus far, it’s only been things like snapdragons and columbines, nothing difficult, but still it impresses them.

My new baby freshman roommate, bless her heart, has picked up on this too. The other day we were walking to church together. She turned to me and asked, “I saw these flowers while I was on a walk yesterday and was wondering if you could tell me what they are.” I was a little nervous because, as you know, it’s tricky trying to guess what kind of a plant someone is talking about. I asked her what they looked like and she described, “Well, they only grow with dandelions. They are about the same size as dandelions, but they have fluffy white tops you can blow off.” Skeptic that I am, I thought she was making fun of me, but sadly she wasn’t. Sadder still, there isn’t a face-saving way to say, “Honey, those *are* dandelions.”

On one occasion we were riding horseback through Harriman State Park. We had talked about elk, their environment, and some of their mating habits. It was a cool, damp morning as we rode into the thick lodgepole pine and douglas fir. We were hoping to hear the high-pitched bugle of the bull elk as he challenges another bull for mating rights. But after winding our way through the trees for over an hour, we still had heard nothing. The students were getting cold and restless. I stopped and told them we could go only a little while longer; then we would have to turn back. I also explained that sometimes the weather does funny things to rutting elk. Sometimes it makes them crazy; sometimes, apparently like that morning, it quiets them down almost completely. Then we resumed our journey. We hadn’t gone more than a few minutes when, on the thickly timbered elevation about 30 yards to our left, a bull topped the ridge. Hearing our horses’ hooves, and thinking, I guess, that we were

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elk moving through the trees, he let out a bugle like no other. You could almost feel the air escaping his tightened vocal chords. The undergrowth was too thick for us to see him, but just a few moments later we saw him as he made his way further along the ridge and crossed a clearing. So they heard a bull elk bugle alright, even felt it, as I had so inadequately tried to describe. No more complaints about the cold. ☺