MY NATIONAL FOREST
Susan Swetnam
(1997)

MY NATIONAL FOREST is not one of the spectacular ones. It has no geysers, no peaks much over 8,000 feet, no deep canyons or waterfalls or bears. Instead, like so many national forests in the West, it has a name unknown to most outsiders—the Caribou—and it sits in a spot that looks unremarkable on a map, about nine miles southwest of Pocatello, Idaho. The part of the Caribou that I call particularly mine is especially modest: a mile and a half along the north/south tending Mink Creek Road where I run or walk nearly every morning, stretching from the entrance cattleguard to the turnoff road for Scout Mountain.

My national forest does have the Cherry Springs Nature Area, snug down along the creek a few hundred yards west of the road, where cranes sometimes nest in summer, gargling at sunrise as I pass, and to the southeast the head of Scout towers craggy and impressive, a few ridges back. Mostly, though, the setting is what one can see anywhere in the little mountain river bottoms of the Intermountain West. Rounded ridges rise a few hundred feet above the road on the east side, blanketed with sage and juniper and drifts of arrowleaf balsamroot in spring; to the west, beyond the line of red willows that marks the creek, the ridges pop up a little more sharply, a thousand feet or so. In deep summer the stretch can be sere and almost drab, crackling brown vegetation and grasshoppers singing in the heat. In winter, hats of cloud sit on the high ridges one day, then drifts and swirls of snow howl the next, wind easily strong enough to stop a pedestrian.

Though I often remember how lucky I am to have a national forest for my backyard, how exotic all of this is—given my girlhood in the Philadelphia suburbs—long acquaintance has taught me not to romanticize the place. In warm seasons, for instance, it is littered with dead things, testimony to the many cars heading for the greater Caribou beyond—for picnics on Scout or for the two official and many unofficial campgrounds, for the hiking and jeep trails, for the logging operations up high. Some spring mornings, the road is slippery with the greenish-yellow spots of ex-goldfinches. In high summer, snakes of all sizes and descriptions lie squashed where they came to seek road warmth when the draws cooled after sunset. The bodies of feral cats appear, pathetic on the roadside, and every now and then a deer dies in public and sits for months just off the road where it was dragged or crawled, its grin getting ghastlier every day. From repeated experience, I know just how long a skunk carcass takes to decay in various weathers.

My national forest also draws a variety of unglamourous human beings—when the sign says, “Land of Many Uses,” it’s not kidding. Summer weekends bring campers squatting wherever there’s a turn-out, sleeping open or under their trucks. Ominous abandoned cars, plateless, make me cross the road sometimes, though I’ve never been threatened. Once, coming around a blind corner, I surprised a man peeing next to his dented Buick, in which he had clearly slept. What could we do? We said howdy and waved.

Hunting season is the worst. Technically, one can’t hunt in my national forest because of the nature area and the two or three grandfathered inholdings, and most hunters do simply roar through on their way to higher, legal ground—orange-clad blurs in big trucks that almost never move over for runners. Now and then, though, they stop to tear down the “no shooting” signs, and occasionally they put them to more creative uses. One morning for instance, my husband and I saw a pair of hunters sighting at 6 a.m. from a truck right over one of those signs, down to Cherry Springs.

But hunters are far from the only ones who break the morning solitude. The mountain bikers who come in hordes in summer almost never move their Subarus over, nor do the cross-
country skiers. On Memorial Day, Fourth of July, and Labor Day weekends, skinny, glamorous runners appear in force, and they sometimes don’t say hello to me—clearly not a real runner with my modest pace and my 47-year-old body. More benignly, neighbors much older than I stroll into the edges of my national forest, setting up Saturday morning routines that last for months. A friend walks her llamas or sometimes, hilariously, tries to run with them. Caravans of Auduboners pass, earnest in their Tilley hats, on their way to Cherry Springs for bird counts. Yellow busses of children come through in May to pass the hours until school is out; white busses of convict laborers come in July to cut brush from around the telephone poles.

In spite of all these human incursions, my national forest is usually quiet early in the mornings, and it insists on its own rhythms. With daily visits over the four years since we moved out from town, I’ve learned where to look for the surprises that mark the immediate intersections of seasons: to a particular patch of aspens in a north-facing draw for the first fall gold, to Scout itself for the first sugar snow, to the big whale ridge where cornices linger longest in June, to the chokecherry tree that always flowers first. I’ve also seen the great variety of wild creatures who live along the road—for some species are much better than others at avoiding the cars. Besides the cranes, the Caribou holds geese, and ducks in the little pools where the creek runs close to the road, and mountain bluebirds who prefer one particular tree. It also has eagles. One morning, I watched a young bald fly alone up the creek, so low and smooth that only the sudden hush falling just ahead of him hinted his passing.

Along with the predictable deer and rabbits and assorted voles, my national forest holds some bigger animals, too—though not now and never in history so far as I can tell, the caribou for whom it was named. There is a moose, who comes down the ridges to the creek. Though I’ve never seen him, many others have: my husband and several of my friends on their own morning trips to the Caribou, and some drunks fishing out of season who were treed in the dark by the moose several summers ago and had to be rescued by the police, babbling as they climbed down of bear, of sasquatch. My own closest encounters have been with improbable animal jogging companions, notably a skunk who came the other way one day, bounding comfortably along facing traffic like any responsible runner, head bobbing as we passed in a way easy to imagine as a companionable Walt Disney nod. And my bobcat with her little tufted ears, who ran alongside me in a stretch of tall grass once or twice a week all one summer.

In those quiet times, my national forest has given me many gifts. For one thing, it has kept me honest about the discrepancies of head and heart. After the Yellowstone fires, when we lived in town and I knew people working on fire ecology, I used to lecture my Eastern friends when they lamented the ruin of the park. Didn’t they know, I argued, that fires were necessary? Didn’t they realize what would happen without periodic fires? Did they want the park to be tamed, artificial? But now, as a member of the volunteer fire department that protects my national forest, I keep silent about such things. For I know that, despite the real evidence that fire is sometimes good, it someone set my national forest on fire, after I helped put it out, I would find his house and burn it down.

My national forest also gives me the predictable inspirations born of beta-endorphins and sunrise on ridges. I find help with writing, with problem students from my classes at the university, with friends, I think of good things to do with my Girl Scout troop; I find diplomatic advice to give my teaching assistants.

But the best times that my national forest gives me are the hours when my brain shuts off without my even noticing—when my national forest, like a long-term marriage partner, grants me the substantial gift of not paying attention at every moment. On such days, the rhythms of feet and breath take over, and I run along without a thought in my head, mindless as a hunter, as a moose. On such days, I come home refreshed, and the remainder of the day is touched by the quiet—memories of a pink sunrise glow up in an aspen bowl that I didn’t even register at the time, the
crackle of the creek running under ice, a flash of magpie crossing the road. And I have noticed the forest giving such charmed moments of mindless solitude to others, too. I’ve glimpsed prison laborers pausing to look at the sky, schoolkids messing alone in the riffles way down the creek from the shrieking horde, mountain bikers actually stopped for longer than necessary, water bottles long empty, scanning the ridges. I know, too, that up high the good hunters separate and sit for hours, musing as well as stalking.

Such moments, I think, are the strongest argument that, despite all our use, our sullying, these hills and these little mountain river bottoms must be safeguarded. For it is in these very modest “wild” places of the West that most of us, no matter why we thought we were visiting in the first place, remember the pleasure of coming out of ourselves, the joy of being simply eyes and ears and muscle for a while—and the joy of sharing, against great odds of our own making, their everyday peace.