

PILEATED WOODPECKERS IN FEBRUARY

ESSAY BY RICK BASS

More sounds, on the 18th and 19th of February, after so much silence: the air aswirl with the strange raucous chitterings of the pileated woodpeckers calling out as they fly from ailing tree to ailing tree, searching for the ants and beetles that feast upon those trees, as the pileateds, with their long anvil bills, feed upon those insects, so that—again, another marvelous equation—a forest grove of dead or dying trees, rotting or burned, equals the sight and sound of a great pileated woodpecker, 3 feet from bright red head to tail and with an even larger wingspan, flying through these forests with wild whoops and wails and laughs. And while it is an equation beyond our ken to completely measure or replicate or even fully understand, it is not one that lies beyond our ability to observe and celebrate, which is, to paraphrase the poet Mary Oliver, exactly what I have been doing, all day.

And again, the sameness or similarity of the world's secret equations, and its patterns, expresses itself across the different media; as the shouting, laughing giant woodpecker is in many ways but a miraculous blossoming of the deadstanding spars—little more than a leap of thought, as if the deadstanding spar had all along desired to become such a bright and flightworthy and attractive bird—so too does the sound of the great pileated woodpecker carry within it the same energy and pattern, the vibrancy, of the silent sap that is beginning to stir in the living trees, and of the overwintering insects that are beginning to stir in the dead or compromised ones. It all seems to be attempting to merge, once winter starts to lift.

Unerringly, it seems, the woodpeckers swoop to the trees that contain the stirring insects. (How do they know? By sight, by sound, by odor, by intuition?) Tentatively at first, they begin to tap at the chosen tree, probing it, until, within the first few trial excavations, the tender and delicious insects are revealed to the uncurling tongue, and further excavation begins now in earnest. A rapid, concussive drumming issues throughout the forest, the

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pileated hammering out its deep and distinctive rectangle-shaped cavity, chips and slivers of bark flying everywhere—the bird, it seems to me, preferring to test the green bark of still-living trees, in February. (Do the woodpeckers mark with anticipation, visually or otherwise, those trees each autumn that are or might possibly be newly diseased?) There could be ten thousand reasons, ten thousand related connections, dependencies and advantages for such an intricate seasonal preference, some acute and exquisite forest balance, but all I know is that in February, one notices with far greater frequency the new-peeled slivers of green glistening bark resting atop the new snow, new wood pale and bright as new-milled lumber, and chips scattered about wildly, looking at first like the residue from where some sawyer passed just hours before with ax or chainsaw. . . .

And in the drumming sound of those excavations, despite the falling snow, one can hear another of the first sounds of spring returning, and in those glistening chips and slivers that the woodpecker has carved from the trunk, one can see that the sap is beginning to move, just like the river, and just like earth, and just like the braids and ribbons of ducks and geese overhead. The butter-colored wood chips are sticky with living resin, and revealed like that, resting upon the open snow, it is as if the blood-within-the-blood, the sap within the sleeping tree, and the sleeping tree within the sleeping forest, is beginning to awaken; and again, whether the woodpecker is drawn to the first few signs and clues of that awakening, or perhaps participates more actively, helping to accelerate that awakening, not just with the booming cannonade of its drumming, and its wild and strange calls, but with the actual cracking open of those new-stirring trees, I could not say for sure, nor have I met anyone who could; nor do I need to know.

Again, I really need only to know that I like to walk across the diminishing snow, in February, usually on snowshoes, and notice, and celebrate, those bright new-peeled ribbons of bark resting fragrant upon the snow, and to know that there are forests where I can do this; that there are forests where I will always be able to do this. 🐿

