

Pyle Classroom Guide for Teachers:

Student prep ideas: You may choose to let the presenter speak for himself, mentioning only that they should listen for the sweet tune of the Wilson’s warbler in the background. Or you may want to introduce Bob Pyle as a Yale Forestry School graduate and Fullbright Fellow who lives in Gray’s River in SW Washington. He founded the Xerces Society, which protects wildlife through the conservation of invertebrates, and has published hundreds of essays and poems and fourteen books, one of which won the John Burroughs Medal for Distinguished Nature Writing. “Place,” he says of himself, “is what takes me out of myself, out of the limited scope of human activity, but this is not misanthropic. A sense of place is a way of embracing humanity among all of its neighbors. It is an entry into the larger world.”

Part 1 (28:05): In part 1, Bob asks us to train our attention on other organisms, and responds to questions that address the “movement of water over territory” and the “extinction of experience.” Read “Beforetimes: Going to Ground in Gray’s River” in *Sky Time in Gray’s River* (below).

0:00 Introduction

0:29 Going to Ground (reading); attention and awareness

8:33 Q & A: movement of water over territory

19:09 Q & A: extinction of experience

Part 2 (25:48): In part 2, Bob draws a startling comparison between the “nature writing” of Michael Pollan’s *The Botany of Desire* and Jay McInerney’s *Bright Lights, Big City*. He answers questions about his passion for butterflies and Darwin’s concept of a “tangled bank.” Read Darwin’s excerpt (below) and discuss its meaning in today’s vernacular.

0:00 Introduction

0:29 false dichotomies: Botany of Desire; Bright Lights, Big City

11:09 Mariposa Road (reading); reverence for butterflies

19:51 Q & A: Darwin’s “tangled bank”

Don’t miss the guitar-poem by former Nirvana bassist, Krist Novoselic, and Pyle (link in **Selected Bibliography**).

Further classroom discussion/writing prompts:

1. Comment on Pyle’s query, “How can any thing not be part of nature?”
2. Decipher writer Tisdale’s phrase, “mammalian vigilance.” Decipher Pyle’s phrase, “unimpeded and unencumbered by our own devices.”
3. Carry Pyle’s logic of the comparison of Michael Pollan’s *The Botany of Desire* and Jay McInerney’s *Bright Lights, Big City* through to another pair of books.
4. How many non-human species does Pyle mention in his “Beforetimes: Going to Ground in Gray’s River” passage? Repeat his exercise: step out your back door and pick a destination within 15 feet.

Walk there and back, taking as much time as you want. Record every non-human organism you see.

5. Read a description of a walking route close to home or school and draw a map from this information. Exchange your map with a partner who has done the same thing, and compare notes as you each try to find your way along the route, using the interpreted maps. Try the reverse: from a map try to write a description. Does the absence of true experience with the route make this extremely difficult, if not impossible? As a group, traverse a single route and write descriptions of it or detail your encounters. Compare the narratives. How does each person experience the place differently?

6. What does it mean to you to go outdoors, observe, and have that experience be “unmediated”?

7. Pyle calls the river “soulful”; is this similar to calling it “spiritual”? Why or why not?

8. When have you “abstracted” the wild, and what did it mean when you did so? How did this lead you to feel?

9. In his book “The Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder,” the author Richard Louv expands upon many of Pyle’s same themes. Do you think Pyle’s arguments justify this “disorder”? Do you think there are remedies for this condition? How do you remedy this, if at all, in your own life?

10. Pyle describes the “implantation at birth of the electronic umbilicus that leads to the perpetual wiring of children and the engagement with the virtual and the electronic.” Is this your experience? What are the benefits and drawbacks of this experience?

11. Do you perceive any false dichotomies in your life experience? That is, does your view of the world include divisions between entities having much more in common than they do in opposition?

Selected passages:

from “Beforetimes: Going to Ground in Gray’s River” in *Sky Time in Gray’s River*

Walking to the compost this morning, I was arrested by the sight of a leaf pinioned on a rush spike. The bunch of rushes grows in a pot in the corner of the heather garden. The leaf was birch clear yellow spattered with remnant green. In hung there, impaled as it fell from the tall white wand of the birch. Shivering on the light November air, the leaf was like a moment of grace before the fall. The compost heap shone bright with still more leaves of maple, oak, and hornbeam, spattered among bracts of Brussels sprouts, over-the-hill red currants, and the collapsed brainpan of a jack o’ lantern – the exuviae of a satisfied autumn and its festivals.

Returning to the house, I paused as always to rinse the white china chamber pot in the spray of a standing spigot. Just before tossing the water onto the heather, I noticed a struggling spider in the chilly swirl. Spiders up spouts suffer a well-known fate, and so it had. But rescued with an oak leaf, it unfolded just fine. When I placed it on the spigot post, I saw a rotund female of another species, a big native orb weaver, hunched up under the handle. The skinnier one crawled back into its shelter, apparently uninjured by the dunking. So the two spiders had been there together at this late date, somehow surviving the harsh frosts and heavy rains of recent mornings.

As I approached the back porch a Stellar’s jay rocketed off, screaming that the kibbles were all gone from the cat’s dish. An elegant Anderson’s slug, slender, yellow-rimmed, reticulated, glided away from the bowl, too. From the doorway I noticed a flutter in a tall English oak by the drive. The first-year Townsend’s warblers that had come for Thanksgiving were still there, flickering through the tawny foliage together while chickadees and kinglets loitered off to the side.

The migrant warblers' lemony breasts and faces were as bright as the slug's mantle; their presence was as unexpected as a pair of spiders in late autumn, their gift as sudden and fleeting as a birch leaf on a rush spike.

from "Tree Time" in *Sky Time in Gray's River*

Ed Sorenson's grandfather planted many of Swede Park's trees. When I bought the place, Ed offered to take five thousand off the selling price if I would agree not to cut the old trees. I tried to look as if I was thinking it over before agreeing. The task of raking the millions of leaves those trees would produce did not occur to me then. As I have learned since, those leaves are the gift of exercise and compost that never stops giving – at least not until the trees themselves fall. And then comes their other gift: their very bodies, sunlight made manifest in wood.

The trees of Willapa Hills were once among the largest in the world, redwoods aside. But within a single century, the giant Douglas-firs, western hemlocks, Sitka spruces, and western red cedars nearly all vanished. Logging has shifted from what once seemed a cornucopia of timber from Very Big Trees to a fluctuating trickle of pulp from conifers that could be mistaken for slightly overgrown Christmas trees. Looking out from here into the surrounding mountains, I see evergreens from one to thirty years old. A few seventy-fivers or so remain among the alders on slopes of Elk Mountain the somehow escaped industrial replanting. Although we have managed to protect a few small but important remnants of original forest here and there in the hills, the concept of "big tree" is essentially foreign to Willapa today.

Swede Park is often called "that place with the big old trees." H.P. Ahlberg began planting hardwoods native to Europe and eastern North America a hundred and thirty years ago. There is the Lincoln oak on the front lawn, and up the slope stands the Broken oak, another ponderous *Quercus rubra*, which broke in half one February; the easternmost of the twin trunks fell directly between the house and the studio, pulverizing the root cellar. And the massive, ferny trunk of the Tall Oak, also a red, rises beside our entrance drive. At more than 130 feet, it is the tallest ornamental tree recorded in the entire state, excluding redwoods. Along with these three, two other enormous red oaks mount the eastern and western skylines of this sliver of the maritime Northwest, more than a thousand miles from their native range.

from Chapter 14 *Recapitulation and Conclusion*, final paragraph, in Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859)

It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. These laws, taken in the largest sense, being growth with reproduction; inheritance which is almost implied by reproduction; Variability from the indirect and direct action of the external conditions of life, and from use and disuse; a ratio of increase so high as to lead to a struggle for life, and as a consequence to natural selection, entailing divergence of character and the extinction of less-improved forms. Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.

from *Mariposa Road*

Around four, I came to a primitive campsite on St Mary's River, a broad, gently winding black water river. Train whistles blew from the Georgia side. I had a banana for lunch, and spread out the peel for bait. A bright, green anole shuffled in the leaves beside an oak log covered with [conchs], and then turned dark against the gray bark as if a Green Hairstreak butterfly became a Frosted Elfin before my eyes. I soaked my sore feet in the river. They looked amber in the shallows, then disappeared altogether. That truly black water, the steep slippery slope, and the possibility of unseen alligators and who knows what all argued against going any deeper. But it felt so good on my hot, sweaty skin so of course I stripped off and went in. Not as cold as the Colorado River, a month earlier, but cold enough, and when I swam toward a bald cypress the water looked like orange pekoe iced tea, steeped too long with too many bags. I stood on my knees in soft silt, just my head out of the water, looking up at wild pink azaleas with four species of enormous elegant swallowtails dripping from them: Spice bush, pipe vine, Eastern tiger and palamedes. Soft breeze and dragonflies stitched the surface as swallow tailed kites, sewed it back together. This is what I dreamt of, when I dreamt of this trip. I rose, placed my bare little fanny on a tuffet of moss, and just grinned and grinned.

Selected Bibliography:

Mariposa Road: The First Butterfly Big Year. 2010. Houghton Mifflin.

Sky Time in Gray's River: Living for Keeps in a Forgotten Place. 2007. Houghton Mifflin.

The Butterflies of Cascadia: A Field Guide to All the Species of Washington, Oregon, and Surrounding Territories. 2002. Seattle Audubon Society.

Nabokov's Butterflies. Edited and annotated by Pyle and Brian Boyd, with new translations from the Russian by Dmitri Nabokov. 2000. Beacon Press.

Walking the High Ridge: Life As Field Trip. 2000. Milkweed Editions.

Chasing Monarchs: A Migration with the Butterflies of Passage. 1999. Houghton Mifflin.

The Thunder Tree: Lessons from An Urban Wildland. 1998. Lyons Press.

Where Bigfoot Walks: Crossing the Dark Divide. 1995. Houghton Mifflin.

Wintergreen: Listening to the Land's Heart. 1987. Houghton Mifflin.

The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Butterflies. 1981. Knopf.

Notes from the Edge of the Known World. 2010. Guitar-poem by Krist Novoselic (co-founder and bassist of Nirvana) and Pyle that "explores that perpetual cycle, that everlasting, ever-loving ferment of creature and leaf, time and flow, life and death, rot and rebirth." **Notes From The Edge of the Known World** by [Robert Michael Pyle & Krist Novoselic](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](#);

http://graysriver.grange.wahkiakum.info/grays_river_grange/2010/09/notes-from-the-edge-of-the-known-world.html

Notes From the Edge of the Known World

When winter wren and varied thrush break into April voices and elderberry branches crack and thrust, and Sitka spruce and caws of crow and wild waves all slap on ocean shore, this small black beetle jaws a crumb and smaller scarlet mite roves over needled dirt to somewhere we will never see, as sword fern rots upon its ancient mound and fiddleheads unfurl. When sorrel triplets burst upon the guileless scene and moss-hung branches point a way through trackless wood, where puma sinks its teeth in throat of deer who gives its life unwillingly but has no choice.

When somewhere on the other side of time and whirling world beside some withered waterhole a warthog coughs and baboon flashes scarlet rump and grimace blue and toothy at the other males, at swollen gravid female, at lioness who charges, then withdraws behind the yellow grass. Then polar bears on permafrost and skuas over tundra sedge will take whatever sustenance the day affords, then sleep, and sleep, and sleep some more despite the midnight sun. As in the forest gloom the lichen hangs and sways above the snailish stream and mushrooms crowd the mossy bank where hemlocks screen the sunlight from the silage of the slugs and slime, of molds and time, where waterbears and woodlice roam, bacteria and nematodes make way among the great and fleshy entrails of the world.

And what about the turquoise-mantled giant clam cemented in the coral reef beneath antipodean skies, the urchins dragging spines across the limey bottoms, poking holes in waterbags to make the ocean new for every life on every tide? Or clouds that drop their shadows on the desert floor, that parking lot for tortoises, where cactus reaches out for gods it never knew or needed? Flash-floods scrape away whatever luck the horned toad ever had. Which isn't much,

it seems, until you think of otter clamped in orca's gape or flank of desert oryx running red beneath the claws of leopard, every desiccated leaf and flower folded in upon itself, until you think of ants and worms and voles and frogs in tractor ruts or salmon smolts in heron's bill. Until you think of *this* great ape,

the one that stands upright and poses every question ever asked,
in such a world where everything that grows breaks down
and down, and down, then grows,
and grows and grows, and grows again.