

Nature's Classroom

North Woods: An Interview with Laurie D. Morrissey

Questions Provided by Jeff Hoagland and Tom Sacramona

You are a nonfiction writer, contributing to a nature magazine column. What sorts of topics have you covered? You are also a haiku poet. What is the intersection of your nonfiction work and your poetry? Please tell us more and how to read your articles.

I used to have nine-to-five jobs that involved writing about topics that did not include nature. Now, I write mostly about the outdoors because that's where my curiosity takes me. That journey often leads to writing, whether it's poetry, personal essays, or nonfiction articles. I enjoy all three forms, and they all feed into each other. While writing an article on kingfishers, for example, immersion in the topic brings a deeper sense of wonder, which finds expression in one or more poems. Conversely, the moment of observation that sparks a haiku about spotted sandpipers prompts me to wonder about their life history—and then the research for an article begins. I frequently write articles for "The Outside Story," a syndicated column produced weekly by the Center for Northern Woodlands Education. These appear in newspapers throughout the northeastern U.S. (The entire treasure trove can be found at <https://northernwoodlands.org/>). For a couple of years, I wrote a column for *Northern Woodlands* magazine about the origin of curious woods terms like "spruce up" and "pine away." My nature articles also appear in *Connecticut Woodlands* and other publications.

Some of my nature writing is more atmospheric and nostalgic than scientific. I'll write an essay or a poem about a May snowstorm, or an afternoon spent skating on black ice. I often write about memories that have stayed with me from childhood, like chasing fireflies at night, or hearing the drumming of a ruffed grouse

on a spring evening. These essays and poems have appeared in magazines like *Northern Woodlands*, *New Hampshire Home*, *Vermont Almanac*, *AMC Outdoors*, *Blueline*, and *Appalachia*.

I subscribe to “The Outside Story” to enhance my own walks and find inspiration for haiku. The articles are so well-timed with the seasons and often deepen my connection and understanding of the woods. How do you find inspiration for these articles? Please tell us more about writing this column for *Northern Woodlands*. Do you find any of it challenging? What have you taken away from the experience?

The Center for Woodlands Education produces a beautiful magazine as well as a syndicated column, and all of the writers are top-notch. Many of the readers work in forestry and wildlife ecology, so the research is critical. But the readership is diverse, so I need to balance the scientific and the personal, and fit all the most interesting bits into a specified word count. The most challenging part, though, is coming up with topics. *Northern Woodlands* has been published quarterly for more than 25 years. The Outside Story series has been published weekly since 2002. When I think of a topic that interests me, I often find it’s been covered. If it’s been done recently, I try to find a new angle. For example, instead of writing about kingfishers, I combined them with bank swallows for a piece called “The Birds of Middle Earth.” Both species dig their own nesting burrows. A kingfisher’s tunnel is typically three to six feet deep, and it can be much longer. As far as the takeaway, I guess it’s confirmation that it is never impossible to discover a good story idea. Sometimes, you just have to keep turning the mental kaleidoscope (as Mark Twain said) and making new and curious combinations with the same old pieces of colored glass.

Can you share more about life events and experiences before *Northern Woodlands* that solidified your love of the outdoors? What activities do you enjoy in nature?

The seeds were definitely planted at a young age. My father was a

state park ranger and my family lived in a house on the park. My brother and I had a lake and 100 acres of woods for a back yard, so we spent our days swimming, ice skating, catching frogs, and climbing trees. We had no near neighbors, so for most of the year, we had solitary pursuits. I spent hours drawing birds that came to our feeder and writing stories about animals. Growing up, I spent a lot of time with my father as he did his job or just walked for pleasure. He may not have realized it, but he was training me to be a careful observer of nature. Walking is still my favorite outdoor activity, but I love cross-country skiing, cycling, and paddling. I also love sitting in a rocking chair on the deck in the early morning listening to the birds, reading haiku, and writing in my notebook.

How did you know haiku was for you? What were you reading when it first clicked and you realized that you wanted to write and read haiku yourself?

The first time I wrote a haiku was in 1997 for a contest at a college where I was teaching. The 5-7-5 syllable count was specified in the rules. I won first prize, but my haiku wasn't very good. I realize now that the judges probably didn't know much about English-language haiku, and neither did I. I didn't write another until 2015. Then I looked for journals that published haiku and began reading and submitting. When I began having acceptances, I was motivated to keep writing and studying haiku. The first haiku poet who caught my interest was Wally Swist. When I found a poem of mine sharing space in the same journal, I was thrilled.

Phenology is the study of the timing of recurring biological events. Is there a favorite time of year or favorite phenological event that moves you most to write?

Any kind of snowy day is an ideal writing day for me. But every time of year has its beauty, including "stick season," as we call November in New Hampshire. I especially like "edge seasons," the transition from one season to another.

What is your favorite haiku by another writer right now?

Even picking out my favorite haiku in one issue of one journal would be a challenge. I looked at some recent journals to see which poems I've highlighted—and there are many. I do tend to love very simple haiku set in nature. Two recent favorites:

shoveling as it snows twilight

kjmunro, *First Frost* #1

winter
the curve
of the hill

Bill Kenney, *First Frost* #1

That said, I appreciate a haiku that makes me laugh, such as these:

This morning I read a word.
Not the whole thing
but it's a start

Peter Meister, *bottle rockets* #45

squirrel on the feeder
grandpa
off his rocker

Lew Watts, *The Heron's Nest* (Dec. 2020)

Are there books you keep as references on plants, animals, or locales in which you live and write?

I keep several field guides handy: Audubon and Peterson guides, as well guides by Stokes and Sibley. I also have my old ornithology

and dendrology textbooks, and I turn to those occasionally, although the information on Cornell Ornithology Lab's website and the Audubon Society website is more up-to-date. I keep a quaint little field guide from 1910 (*Fieldbook of Wild Birds and Their Music* by F. Schuyler Mathews) for its antique charm—a different type of reference altogether.

Can you provide examples of your own haiku that were inspired by your research into specifically terming a plant, animal, or natural phenomenon?

twilight
a firefly rises
from its reed¹

pine barren moon
the whirr of air
through a nighthawk²

belly-down
staring into the stream
of consciousness³

as if I had nowhere else to go—wild irises

Notes:

1. *The Haiku Calendar 2021* (Snapshot Press)
2. *Wild Graces 7 Anthology*
3. *Frogpond* 44:2

Laurie D. Morrissey lives in Hopkinton, New Hampshire, where she writes poetry and nonfiction. Her poems are published regularly in literary/haiku journals and anthologies, and have earned various forms of recognition including a Pushcart Prize nomination. She is a poetry editor at The Worcester Review and a book reviewer for Frogpond. Her collection of haiku, the slant of april snow, is published by Red Moon Press.