

Spring Ecosystems Post Visit Project

The Web – a story about Ecosystems

This story takes place at a camp in Michigan called Camp Niobe. The word niobe is Greek for willow. The lake at the camp was surrounded by beautiful weeping Willow trees, so you can see where the camp got its name. Something is going on at Camp Niobe, something very obvious. As a matter of fact, it is so obvious that no one even notices. But it is very special. By listening to this story, maybe you can figure out what is going on.

Like a jigsaw puzzle or a quilt, this story is made up of many small pieces. At first the pieces don't seem to go together, but if you listen carefully, you will find that the pieces fit perfectly. Your job is to try to find how these pieces fit so you can see the mystery that is right before your eyes.

Here is the first piece:

In one of the cabins at Camp Niobe, in the rafters above my bed, of all places, there lived a family of raccoons. If you know anything about raccoons, you know that they make a real terrible mess. Gosh it really smelled in there! The cabin was the raccoon family's winter home, but in the summer they moved out to a hollow stump behind the cabin; that was their summer home.

Now, one year, I came to Niobe early, before any of the campers arrived. My job was to clean out all of the cabins, but I really came because I wanted to see how well I would do if I tried to live off the land. I was all on my own, out in the wilds of Michigan, with only myself to rely on.

I brought very little to the camp-just some brown rice and some seeds. I gathered wild greens from the fields. I went fishing for dinner and usually caught a nice bass or bluegill. To go with that, I would dig up cattail roots. That's right. Cattail roots, if you cook them right, they are a little bit like potatoes.

I found plenty to eat. Sometimes I caught frogs and ate their legs. You are probably saying "Yuck!" But have you ever had frog legs? Don't knock it till you tried it. They are delicious!

And that wasn't all. One field was filled with dandelions. I gathered wild greens and made a salad with flowers for flavor and color.

After I made my dinner, I would sit at a picnic table just outside the dining hall. Before me was the meadow where I had just gathered my greens. While I was eating my dinner of frog legs or fish and a salad and roots, a family of groundhogs would come to play in the field. There was a big mama groundhog, with her three babies rolling wrestling and playing. Every night they entertained me while I ate my dinner.

Raccoons, greens, roots, frog legs, and groundhogs. We already have five pieces to the story. Like I said, it's like a jigsaw puzzle. Your job is to figure out how these pieces fit together.

Here's another piece:

One of my favorite things to do at Niobe was fishing. I love to go fishing in the early morning and late in the evening. If you know anything about fishing, then you

know sunrise and sunset are the best times to be on the water. I knew that and so did Lars, the camp's maintenance man.

After the camp opened for the summer, I was not alone. Sometimes Lars woke me up at 4 o'clock in the morning. Lars would tiptoe into the cabin where some boys and I were sleeping, and whisper, "Come on! Get up! Come on!"

Quietly, so as to not wake the campers who shared the cabin, I would grab my tackle box and fishing pole. Then Lars and I would tiptoe out of the cabin. Screeeech – of course the door squeaked!

"Lars, you have got to oil that door," I would tease. He was the maintenance man, you know.

This early morning, the clouds were so thick that you couldn't see the stars or the moon. Lars and I climbed into the boat and started rowing. The lake was beautiful, with weeping willow trees lining the shore and fog rising off the water.

Fog rises off lakes in late summer and fall, but not so much during the spring. Do you know why?

Think of the lake as a huge glass of water. But this is warm water. Every day the sun beats down on the lake and slowly, over the course of a long, hot summer, the lake warms up. Then in late summer, the nights cool off. On some cool mornings, when the lake is warmer than the air, the lake will give off moisture to try and warm up the air. That evaporation makes fog.

Back to our foggy morning. The fog (moisture rising off the lake) was so thick that I couldn't even see Lars in the back of the boat. The fog was so thick, I couldn't really see where I was rowing.

Suddenly, *caw! caw! caw!* A great blue heron took flight right next to the boat! It's wings beat over our heads, and it's feet dangled in our faces as it disappeared into the fog.

Have you ever seen a great blue heron? If you haven't then you are missing a pretty bird. They are about four or five feet tall. When they hunt, they fold their wings back as they wade through the shallow water looking for fish or frogs. They move gracefully, like ballerinas. They move slowly, standing on one leg, moving the other leg forward, standing on the other leg. Sometimes, if you stare at a great blue heron hunting, you won't even see it move. That is how slowly they move. Of course, that is the point. They move so slowly that the frogs or fish don't see them coming.

Fog, fish, frogs, heron. Four more pieces of the puzzle. You probably haven't figured it out yet, have you? Don't worry, you will if you listen closely.

Here is another piece:

One hot summer day, I was hanging out on the dock. It was so hot that I was sweating just sitting still. Soon my mind floated off like a little cloud in an otherwise blue sky. As my mind drifted, I looked down into the water on the right side of the dock. Something was splashing around down there. When I looked closer, I saw it was a dragonfly nymph. Do you know what a dragonfly nymph is? It looks like a creature from a horror movie. But is just an immature dragonfly.

As I watched, the dragonfly nymph crawled up the side of a cattail. As it did, the back of its shell cracked. To my amazement, that ugly creature of the swamp climbed out of its shell and became a beautiful creature of the air.

Have you ever seen a dragonfly? The large ones that are turquoise or green? They have four wings that stretch out. You can see through the wings, but when they hold them just right in the sun, they cast a rainbow of colors. Right before my eyes, this dragonfly came out of its shell, and fluid filled its wings.

That is another piece of the story. Is it starting to come together yet? It will, Don't worry.

Here is the final piece:

One summer night, I was out in the early evening, about sunset, doing some fishing. Now I already told you that sunrise and sunset are the best times to go fishing. But what I didn't tell you is that that is also the best time for mosquitoes too! *Bzzz!* Mosquitoes everywhere! *Bzzz! Slap! Bzzz! Ow!* There went one with a pint of my blood! Flying away with its belly all full of my warm red blood.

All of the sudden a huge dragonfly, with its four huge wings, and its shiny green body, came whizzing by....*Snatch!* It grabbed the mosquito, that had just made off with my blood, right out of the air. *Snatch!* It grabbed another one....and another one! It was just flying around eating hundreds of mosquitoes. Did you know that dragonflies eat mosquitoes.... and deerflies horseflies, and all kinds of biting insects? Let's hear it for dragonflies! The falcons of the insect world! They are my favorite insect! How about you?

But let us get back to the story. There I was, just about sunset, being eaten alive by mosquitoes when.... *Snatch!* A huge dragonfly ate a mosquito that was full of my blood. No sooner had the dragonfly grabbed the mosquito when....*Fwuuump!* A big bullfrog whipped out its tongue and swallowed the dragonfly whole. It was a *huge* bullfrog. The kind that sings late at night down by the lake. *Burumph! Burumph!*

After the bullfrog caught the dragonfly, it began to swim across the lake. Imagine that you are there now. The lake is as still as glass. Reflected in the water you can see all the willow trees, and the pink clouds from the setting sun. The only ripples in the water are being made by the bullfrog swimming. *SPLASH!* Up comes a large mouth bass and swallows the frog whole. The bass swam off to the bottom of the lake and rested, so it could digest its food.

That was it for that night.

A few days later, Lars the maintenance man said, "How'd ya like to go fishin?"

I said, "What kind of question is that? Of course I do!"

That night we headed out to the west end of the lake, where we hadn't fished in a while. I rowed until we got near the far shore, where it was choked with weeds: lily pads, duckweed, and cattails. Then I noticed a spot as big around as a basketball hoop where the water was cleared of weeds. It was a perfect place for fish to hide.

I tied on my favorite lure so I could cast into this spot (which Lars didn't think I could hit). I concentrated real hard and stared at the spot. *Whzzzzzzz! Splash!* Right in the middle of the clearing!

Now this is a floating lure so it just sits on top of the water. You have to let it sit there for a few seconds. This is so the fish don't think that it just fell out of the sky.

After the small ripples went away, I carefully wiggled the lure so that it swam like a wounded minnow. Nothing happened. I pulled again. Still nothing. The lure was almost in the weeds by now. Disappointed, I started to reel in my line and....*Splash!* A bass took

it. I set the hook hard. The fish dove off to the side and tried to tangle my line in the weeds. But I kept tension on the line. I pulled the fish up on the boat. Wow! This was the biggest fish that I ever caught. It was 5 pounds. It was so big that I could stick my whole hand down its throat without touching its razor sharp teeth.

Now I usually let fish go if I already have food, but this one was too good to let it pass. So I rowed back across the lake. I took the fish up to the picnic table outside the dining hall. My campers gathered around me at the table. “What’d ya catch? What’d ya catch?”

I showed them the fish. “See how the fish is dark green on top, and white on the bottom? Imagine that you are looking down into the water. You would see the green bottom of the lake, and top of the fish. If you were on the bottom of the lake looking up, everything above you would look white. So would the bottom of the fish. That is the perfect camouflage for its habitat.”

“Well why does a fish that big need camouflage? There is nothing big enough to eat it.” asked one of the campers.

I explained that bass don’t chase their prey. They hide and wait for it to swim by. If a bass was bright pink, nothing would ever swim by it, and it would never eat. This fish got to be so big because it was good at hiding from predators and prey.

Now, can anybody guess what a big bass like this eats?

A-ha! A bullfrog. And the Bullfrog? A dragonfly. And the dragonfly? A mosquito. And the mosquito? My blood! And me?

I call this story “The Web” for the web that ties us all together. Now do you see how the pieces all fit together? What about the great blue heron? The raccoon? The groundhogs? The campers? How are all of these things tied into the web of life?