

5-4-18 Wonders of Nature

As soon as I arrived at the address for the scheduled perc test, my eyes scanned left and right, looked ahead and I was pretty darn certain of something I would find. I saw a meadow that had once been farmland or a hayfield. It long lay fallow and now was at the beginning stage of returning to the forest it once was. It is only natural. Leave things alone and nature takes over.

This field had young trees scattered here and there, along with plants like milkweed and random thorny brambles. It also had high groundwater. If that high water can drain, that works well for farming. No irrigation is needed.

This combination of a field with small plants and young trees and high groundwater resulted in one type of habitat with rich biodiversity, including insect life, and there is one insect loving that habitat. I was certain I would find praying mantis egg cases. About twenty steps in, my prediction was confirmed. I smiled. A few more steps found a few others. There was even a double, with one case right next to another, on the same branch!

I always have fun showing these to people, as most do not know what they look like. They are all close to identical. Tapered at one end, where the female first began to attach this substance from her body, filled with eggs, to a branch, it extends about an inch and a half, getting wider and rounder, ending in a broken-off appearance. The color is tan. Both the color and layered papery texture remind me of some kind of wood pulp insulation of my childhood, no longer made. What is really fascinating about that wider end is the shape; it is somewhat heart shaped. That heart shape also looks like the stereotypical alien face or an ant face or the face of a praying mantis! How many insects lay egg cases in the shape of their own face? I don't know but I think it is pretty amazing.

Wait time at a perc test is not usually amazing, and there are times when we are waiting. We wait for the deep hole to be dug. We wait while the water "percolates" down through the soil. Those waiting times are also watching times. We are on duty and we watch what is happening. There are other times when we are waiting, and I can look around and take pictures and observe nature. The engineer might be making phone calls, informing the client of the high ground water and waiting for guidance. Sometimes we wait while the excavator knocks over trees and laboriously pulls itself over to the next deep test pit location.

At this recent perc test in the field loaded with praying mantis egg cases, it was mostly the phone calls creating the interruptions. The delays gave me the opportunity to observe the pretty shells of tree snails. You might have disdain for any kind of slug, especially if you are a gardener, but they always remind me of my father demonstrating the snail's ability to slither and slide over a razor blade unharmed. My father was a great teacher.

I took pictures of milk weed pods. I have used them for many craft projects, including angel wings and baby beds for Christmas tree ornaments; even a six-point star representing my six children.

Then, I saw a fast-moving small slender pinkish snake! I did not have the chance to take its picture. (Darn!) It did not have the lively pattern of the copper head snake. Could it be a worm snake? They are protected in Massachusetts! Worms and snails comprise much of their diet and they prefer sandy soils and moist conditions, as we found that day. Hmmmm..... It is probably an ordinary brown snake.

While it was our job that day, I and the engineer, to evaluate the soils, it does not mean that we do not care about what happens after our work is completed. One of the dilemmas we face, or at least I face, is doing my job can conflict with my beliefs and/or wishes. That is a tough place to be. Fortunately, it does not happen often. Sometimes another department resolves my dilemma with its rules. For instance, the Conservation Commission will place restrictions and take measures to protect the environment, especially the wetlands.

It is always difficult to see a wildlife habitat completely destroyed so that something, a house, a business, a solar array, be built. Where do the animals go? Sometimes they move over and then I hear complaints about foxes! Some of those inhabitants will be destroyed, though.

With that in mind, I brought home a few praying mantis egg cases. They are in a box covered with a screen. My rescued friends will soon hatch after a few weeks of warmth, each case releasing about 150 adorable miniature versions of their parents. They will be released to my yard and other habitats, where they will flourish, gobbling up all kinds of insects and amusing people like me who are in awe of the wonders of nature.

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