

A Year in the Maine Woods Study Guide

A Year in the Maine Woods by Bernd Heinrich

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Plot Summary

A Year in the Maine Woods begins in late May, when the author drives from his home in Vermont to a cabin in the Maine woods to spend one year observing the plants and animals of that region. He takes only his pet raven, Jack, along with him. When he arrives he takes stock of everything he wants to accomplish before the winter. He must winterize his cabin, build an outhouse, chop wood for the winter, build an aviary for his captive ravens, plant a garden, build a maple syrup tapping station, and get into marathon-running shape. While doing all these household chores, he also takes time to observe the ravens, beetles, trees, and other wildlife that all make their home near his cabin. Jack begins to gain independence and by the late summer, he flies off and does not return home. He is no longer a pet but simply one of the many ravens in the woods.

As summer fades to fall, the author goes on berry picking adventures that lead him farther and farther away from his cabin. Along the way, he is always observing and noticing the animals and the changing of the seasons. He frets that he has not done enough to prepare for winter and forces himself to work harder to accomplish all he has set out for himself. During the late summer his son, Stuart, comes for a visit. The two spend a lot of time with each other simply going on walks, picking berries, or listening to the sounds of the night. While on one of his walks, he stumbles into a forested area that had been clearcut by loggers many years before. He observes that in the absence of the large old growth trees, the smaller trees are growing at a rapid pace. Soon this area of the forest will look no different than a pristine spot that had never been cut.

When the Christmas season comes around, the author has a bit of nostalgia and dreams of having an old-fashioned Christmas for disadvantaged children at his cabin on the hill. Unfortunately, though he visits his old school and offers his idea to the headmaster, they are not interested in an old-fashioned Christmas. Late in December, the author holds a short intensive Winter Ecology class at his cabin in the woods. His students arrive and he takes them on walks and excursions through the countryside. In late winter, there is a huge snowstorm that dumps many feet of snow on the area. The author still manages to go out into it to make sure his ravens have access to the meat carcasses he leaves them.

As spring comes, the author sets about making a maple syrup operation with his neighbor. While the author is placing his taps in the trees he notices some curious behavior from a red squirrel. He discovers that red squirrels can also make maple syrup using only their teeth and the perfect temperature of a spring day. The author spends a lot of time examining the seeds of the birch and maple trees in the area. He is curious as to why all the birch and sugar maple trees have decided not to blossom and produce seeds that year. At the end of the book, the author goes back to Vermont to attend his daughter and one of his student's graduations. Though it is the first time he has gone to a graduation, he is pleasantly surprised that he actually enjoys the experience. The book ends with the author back at the cabin and his young son happily following in his father's footsteps.

Summer, A Traveling Companion, Adams Hill, Beginnings, Scrap Lumber, The Time of Bird Song

Summer, A Traveling Companion, Adams Hill, Beginnings, Scrap Lumber, The Time of Bird Song Summary and Analysis

"The Traveling Companion" begins with the author's description of his journey to his cabin deep in the woods of Maine. His traveling companion is a raven that he took out of the nest when it was still a baby. The author describes capturing Jack, the raven, and the adjustments that both the author and the raven had to make to live together. During the drive to the cabin, Jack keeps the author entertained with his bird noises and rapid digestion.

"Adams Hill" is a description of the land around the cabin and the family who first settled in the area. The cabin sits up on a high hill, accessible only by a four-wheel drive road. On his first morning, the author awakens to the many different birdcalls. The author is very familiar with the different songs of the birds and plans to study the birds up close during his time in the woods. He notices the trees and flowers blooming and climbs up into a red spruce tree where he has built a look out to observe the natural world.

Along with the trees, flowers, and birds, the author has also made a study of the many settlers who lived in this region before him. He has observed that the small cemeteries are full of the families who first came to the area and that the majority of gravestones belong to children. The families have lived in the area since 1769 and the author is a friend of the descendants of those first settlers. The author describes the countryside and the features of the region along with their history.

In "Beginnings", the author tells us that he does have some contact with the outside world: a telephone in the neighbor's outhouse. This section deals with his goals for the year he will spend in the cabin. He would like to build an outhouse, winterize the cabin, build an aviary for the birds, plant a garden, and get back in the habit of long-distance running. The author makes notes of each day he spends in the cabin with brief notes on the weather, his activities, and the birds he sees in the area.

"Scrap Lumber" describes the author's daily routine of cutting wood and avoiding the biting flies and mosquitoes. While he is working on building the new outhouse, he must make a trip into town to get some scrap lumber. There he meets Peter Kinney, who gives him some wood and fixes his chainsaw. The two men catch up on what has been going on in the area, including an Earth First protest of a logging operation. The logging

company uses small explosions to blow up the trees which can cause injury and even death to anyone nearby.

"The Time of Birdsong" describes the author's all-day observations of the different calls and songs of the birds in the area. In the early evening, swarms of mosquitoes come out, closely followed by several types of songbirds. After the evening chorus dies off, the author wakes very early for the dawn chorus. The birds start when it is still dark and the singing picks up with the increasing light. Some birds continue singing into the late morning, but by the heat of the day, the serenade is over.

The Urgency of Spring, June 12 Early Harvests, Jack, Bedrock, Time

The Urgency of Spring, June 12 Early Harvests, Jack, Bedrock, Time Summary and Analysis

"The Urgency of Spring" is the story of how plants and animals reproduce and die. The author experiments with watching the plants spring up from the ground and then grow towards the sun. He notices the plants in shade grow slower and sometimes never flower. The author also observes a pair of swallows in a nest by his cabin and how quickly they move on with their lives even after their baby birds are killed.

In the section "June 12 Early Harvests", the author continues felling trees and splitting wood for his winter fires. He also rolls rocks under the foundation of his cabin to winterize it. He notes that it is hard work but also rewarding.

"Jack" details the author's relationship with the raven he captured when it was a baby. When they first arrive at the cabin, the raven depends on the author for his food and his companionship. The author finds a wood pile for Jack to sleep on and the raven dutifully sleeps there night after night. Jack begins to learn to fly, and after a few weeks begins to fly off on his own. Still, the raven acts very much like a child, following everything the author does and pecking at him to get attention. The author observes Jack's interactions with a dog and later a cat as the bird learns how to deal with potential predators. Other young ravens visit the cabin and the author notes that they are becoming more independent of their parents. Jack begins to take off on longer journeys of his own and is less interested in his former friend. Eventually Jack flies away from the author and the cabin and does not return.

In "Bedrock", the author gives a geologic history of the region. A great glacier expands and retracts across North America for the last few million years. Giant piles of gravel, steep ridges, and ponds are all evidence of the last glacier. The trees that now populate the region are the trees of a warmer, temperate climate. The animals of the region have also changed with the changing climate. When Europeans arrive, they clear the land to make it suitable for agriculture. When farming begins to spread farther west, the land reverts from farmland back to forests. Maine is known for its forests and lumber mills to this day. The author notes that his route to Maine as a child, then away, and finally back again has also been a winding road.

In the section "Time", the author realizes that he has spent over two months now in the cabin. Yet, every moment of his time has been occupied with doing the work he will need to survive the winter. Little tasks take an extraordinary amount of time without electricity or running water. He concludes that the hard work is actually necessary to keep his mind occupied and that he has already become somewhat of a hermit.



August 4 Wanderers, August 6 Late Summer Ramblings, August 9-13 Some Berries, August 14 Whispers of Fall, August 30, Early September, September 13, September 18, September 20 Clearcuts

August 4 Wanderers, August 6 Late Summer Ramblings, August 9-13 Some Berries, August 14 Whispers of Fall, August 30, Early September, September 13, September 18, September 20 Clearcuts Summary and Analysis

The section "August 4 Wanderers" describes a heavy rain and the animals who depend on that moisture. The author notices small amphibians, wood frogs, turtles, and salamanders around his property. They are slow-moving creatures that are guided by evolution to go on long and dangerous journeys.

In "Late Summer Ramblings", the author writes about the changing of the seasons and the life cycle of the moth. During his daily run, he sees a web of many tiny caterpillars all flashing together in unison from side to side. A wasp comes into the scene and the caterpillars respond. The wasp is persistent and eventually shoots an egg into one of the swaying caterpillars. The author notes that this complicated choreography takes place without any effort on the part of the caterpillars and wasps involved.

In "August 9-13 Some Berries", the author is in search of some blueberries. As he climbs closer to a bog, he notices not just blueberries, but also the many cranberries and holly that will later come into season. The author gathers bunches of the berries and reflects on earlier times in his childhood, spent collecting berries. That evening a friend comes to visit and they make a blueberry cobbler and dance in the moonlight.

The author notes more evidence of the seasons changing in "August 14 Whispers of Fall". The author's son Stuart, his daughter Erica, and two friends come for a visit. He fishes with the two boys and then cooks dinner and sits by a fire with all of them at night.

The section "August 30" begins with the author and his son picking blackberries. Together they plant a red oak near the cabin and at night listen to the sounds of birds and animals.

In "Early September", the author and his son Stuart go to the county fair. The author watches in fascination as teams of horses and oxen pull heavy loads for a large crowd of spectators. Later there is a pig scramble competition and his son Stuart takes part. Stuart wins a pig, but then sells it to a farmer. Immediately after, the boy sees a small bunny and buys that to take home as a pet. The bunny, Shadow Black, is set loose near the cabin and is killed by a bird soon after.

In "September 13", the author goes on a long twenty-mile run and observes caterpillars, ravens, and flies along the way.

The author has another run on "September 18" - this time running a length of thirty miles. During his run he notices the first ,apple leaves starting to fall. He wishes he could preserve the vibrant colors of the leaf. After his run, he is relaxed and content.

In the section "September 20 Clearcuts", the weather has become cooler. The author observes some wasps and thinks back to his own father's collection of wasps. He comes to an area which used to be a thick stand of maple, ash, and oak, but years ago was clear cut for lumber. He notices how different it looks already now that many different species are taking root there. He notices the most prevalent species is pin cherry, which is not a very common tree to find. The author describes how logging has gone from hardy men and beasts pulling down trees one by one to huge machines clearcutting massive stands of trees all at once.



**September 23-26 The Garden,
September 27 Starting a Sugar Shack,
October 1 The Foliage, October 3 The
Rendezvous, October 6 Cherry Hill Drive,
October 7 Housemates, October 8
Moose, October 10 Home Chores,
October 11-13, Flying Samaras and
Consciousness**

**September 23-26 The Garden, September 27 Starting a
Sugar Shack, October 1 The Foliage, October 3 The
Rendezvous, October 6 Cherry Hill Drive, October 7
Housemates, October 8 Moose, October 10 Home
Chores, October 11-13, Flying Samaras and
Consciousness Summary and Analysis**

In the section "September 23-26 The Garden", the author observes that the green beans and squash he planted failed to fruit. As he cuts wood for the winter, he notices areas he cleared only a few years before are covered with saplings. The next morning he wakes up and finds the first frost has hit, killing all his remaining vegetables.

"September 27 Starting a Sugar Shack" is about the author's daily routines and his daily runs. After running, he feels refreshed and energized. His children and a friend visit and they share a few meals together.

In "October 1 The Foliage", the first snow falls, but the author is well prepared with a few cords of wood prepared for the winter. He notes the changes of the season. Most of the birds have left and the leaves have fallen off the ash tree. However, the thing that surprises the author the most is the vibrant colors of the fall leaves. During a run, he notices that most of the trees turn from green to yellow. It is only the maples that turn stunning reds, oranges, and purples. The author notes that even within one leaf, there can be color variation. He also observes that single leaves do not turn different colors, but rather turn from green to a specific color and then fall to the ground.



"October 3 The Annual Rendezvous" is about a party that the author hosts up on the mountain every year. He enjoys sharing that beautiful time of year with his friends and family.

In the section "October 6 Cherry Hill Drive", the author drives to a clearing that has been logged many years before. He notes that even though this style of harvesting trees be considered a sloppy, in the end the clearing will look the same as if no logging had ever taken place.

Many forest creatures have invaded the author's house in "October 7 Housemates". When little mice first start to join him in his cabin he thinks they are cute, but eventually their racket keeps them up all night so he exterminates them. He also has an infestation of large flies that hide in the crevices of the cabin and try to fly out when the temperature heats up.

In the section "October 8 Moose", the author writes about hunting and eating moose in Maine and his own personal encounter with one. As he is running through the forest, he comes to a clearing that has been logged a few years earlier. He sees a moose and the two gradually approach each other. The author climbs up into a tree to get a closer look and the moose comes over to examine him. After the experience, he is in great spirits and shares the encounter with his neighbors.

"October 10 Home Chores" is about the author's peculiar style of living in the cabin. He rarely cleans dishes but keeps reusing the same ones over and over. He has developed a simple style of life. He writes about baking bread and that it is actually just a process rather than a recipe.

In "October 11-13" the author has set into a comfortable routine. He sits quietly in the free and observes his surroundings. Hours and hours go by while he watches the birds, the insects, and the trees.

In the section "Flying Samaras and Consciousness", the author writes about the little rotary seeds of the maple tree known as samaras. After observation, he realizes that red maples need a slight breeze to fly off while silver maples need wind. Even the smallest difference between seeds has a reason behind it. From this, the author writes about how consciousness gives humans many choices. It is having those choices which sets us apart from unconscious beings. Love, the author observes, is two people having that consciousness of the future together



October 14 To Find Small Caterpillars, Burning Wood, Scents and Sounds, Trees, October 26-30, Election Time, November 8-9 Jack?, The Moon, Habits and Hunts

October 14 To Find Small Caterpillars, Burning Wood, Scents and Sounds, Trees, October 26-30, Election Time, November 8-9 Jack?, The Moon, Habits and Hunts Summary and Analysis

The author reflects in "October 14 To Find Small Caterpillars" that, like Jack, who hunted and pecked at only the things that interested him, the author has also developed a keen sense of only noticing the unique and new.

In "Burning Wood", the author writes that he is happy he has cut down so much wood and it has given him a feeling of accomplishment. However, he is annoyed that his stove is efficient at cooking food but inefficient at heating his cabin.

In the section "Scents and Sounds", the author listens to the sounds of the night and the smells of fall. In particular, he smells a scent that triggers a memory of a childhood evening with his father. He observes that our memories are like the bark of a tree, built on layer upon layer of experiences.

In "Trees", the author writes about using trees as energy. Trees are very efficient at collecting energy and can grow anywhere. The author prefers using trees for the energy they provide rather than building a dam and flooding the trees.

The cooler winter weather has come in "October 26-30". Now that the leaves have fallen, the author can see for long distances and observe more of the natural world. He finds an old apple orchard and notices the evidence of deer, grouse, bear, and moose visiting the orchard. He happens upon the fresh kill of a fisher, a weasel-like animal. At night he hears the sound of Canadian geese flying south for the winter.

In the section "Election Time", the author's nephew is visiting for a deer hunt. Though they do not spot deer, the author sits quietly in the lookout and observes chipmunks, birds, and squirrels. The squirrels in particular fascinate the author as they try so hard to stay hidden. As the author and his nephew hunt deer, they wander around the countryside and come upon the evidence of farms, cabins, orchards, and cellars that

have long since deteriorated. Though the pair is hunting on election day, the author observes it really has no meaning to them, so removed from the real world.

In "November 8-9 Jack?", the author observes a group of ravens that he has set out food for. They fly and talk to each other and some leave the group and some come back for the night. One raven flies close to the author then circles away and then comes back, and the author wonders if it is his friend Jack.

The author observes the moon in the section "The Moon" and tries to draw conclusions about its orbit, rise, and set based on his observations. He writes about the delicate relationship between the Earth and the moon and how, ultimately, that collision long ago is responsible for our changing seasons today.

In "Habits and Hunts", the author has given up shaving. He notes that he has grown into a comfortable though lazy routine and the only thing lacking in his life is someone to share it with.



November 15 Moss Watch, November 25 Connections, November 28 More Flies, December 3, December 4, December 8, December 9 The Lunar Eclipse, December 11 Wind, December 12 Rump Steak and Roadkills, December 13, December 15 You Can Never Go Back, December 19

November 15 Moss Watch, November 25 Connections, November 28 More Flies, December 3, December 4, December 8, December 9 The Lunar Eclipse, December 11 Wind, December 12 Rump Steak and Roadkills, December 13, December 15 You Can Never Go Back, December 19 Summary and Analysis

In the section "Moss Watch", the author describes the various types of moss and lichen he can see around his cabin. He describes the environments where moss can grow: on rotting stumps and trees, in decaying grass, on rocks and ridges, and sometimes just on the bare ground. The author also writes about the miniature plants left over from previous ice ages that also make their homes close to the ground. He details the intricate patterns of the lichen and the many different colors visible on trees and rocks. At the end of the section, the author encounters a deer while he is up in his tree. When the deer looks at him, he drops an apple on her head, yet she shows no fear and does not move. When he comes down from the tree and onto the ground, she immediately runs away.

The author sets out to go deer hunting in "November 25 Connections". Because a thick blanket of snow has fallen the night before, he has an easy time seeing the tracks of various animals. Though the author has not killed a deer or even fired a shot, he declares it a successful season because he has observed all kinds of animals he may never have encountered if he was not hunting.

In "November 28 More Flies", the author writes about the noisy mice which have taken up residence in the cabin again as well as the large black flies which come out of the

cracks in the wall when the cabin is heated. He sucks them up in the dustbuster and notes that no matter the tens of thousands he has captured, there are always more.

The snow has melted again in "December 3". The author notices that the animals with bright white winter coats like the hare and the weasel seem out of place when the snow melts. He observes the squirrels digging up their stores of seeds and nuts in the ground.

In "December 4", the author decides to make the trip back home to visit with his son Stuart. He notes that he has become rather sick of celebrating Christmas in the traditional American way, but he would love to give some disadvantaged children a chance to experience Christmas up on his hill.

The author visits his son's school in "December 8". The children are fascinated by his stories of ravens, lizards, and beetles. His son, Stuart, is very proud of his father and takes great pleasure in showing him off to his schoolmates.

In the section "December 9 The Lunar Eclipse", the author returns to his cabin in the woods just in time for a full lunar eclipse. He builds a fire and sets out to observe the entire process and make observations through his binoculars. He watches the shadow move over the moon from bottom to top. When the moon is completely covered and the sky is dark, he gets out his binoculars and gazes at the Milky Way. Gradually the moon comes to light again as the shadow moves up and out of the path of the moon.

In "December 11 Wind", the author sets out to look for kinglets, a small bird that is not common in Maine. He finally hears one way in the distance, but the wind overcomes the sound of the birdcall. That night a storm blows in and the author listens to the sound of the wind all night.

In "December 12 Rump Steak", the author discovers that the steak that he thought a friendly neighbor left him to enjoy through the winter was actually spoiled meat meant for his ravens. This makes the author uneasy and he decides not to eat any more even if there was really nothing wrong with the meat. Like roadkill, there may be nothing wrong with it, but there is still a stigma attached, not to mention even illegal.

The author again listens to the wind howling all night in "December 13". The next day he makes drawings of twigs and winter buds.

In the section "December 15 You Can Never Go Back", the author visits his childhood boarding school in order to invite the children to a Christmas up at his cabin. He passes by some of the places that bring back many memories for him. Yet, he notices the place looks very different than his memories. He tries to visit with the headmaster and activity coordinator but it turns out they are not interested in bringing the children up to the hill for Christmas.

In "December 19", the author sits alone on a dark night in front of the fire and suddenly has the urge to throw a winter solstice party. He cannot reach any friends though, and so gives up. That night he has a dream that he is visited by Jack and held him in his arms.



December 21, December 23 Ravens, December 25, 29 December Winter Ecology, January 5 Bog Trip, January 6 A Discussion, Excursions, January 13, January 20 Coyotes, January 25 Sweet and Sour Grubs, The Spiker, January 31, February 2

December 21, December 23 Ravens, December 25, 29 December Winter Ecology, January 5 Bog Trip, January 6 A Discussion, Excursions, January 13, January 20 Coyotes, January 25 Sweet and Sour Grubs, The Spiker, January 31, February 2 Summary and Analysis

In "December 21", the author expresses joy that the mice and flies have mostly left the cabin. Outside, he discovers that a local squirrel has stashed apples all along the path. As an experiment, he also stashes apples to see if the squirrel will take those as well. The squirrel has taken all of the apples within two weeks.

The author details his experiences with the ravens near the cabin in "December 23 Ravens". He notes how perceptive the ravens are to appearances. This is the reason the author must wear a red hat if he is only observing them and does not plan to disturb them.

The author spends Christmas with his family in "December 25". He enjoys spending time with his family and extended family. When he gets back to his cabin, a cold wind has blown in.

Students from the author's university arrive in "December 29 Winter Ecology". He teaches an intensive fifteen-day course every winter up at the cabin. They spend the first day tracking animals.

The author and his students explore the nearby bog in "January 5 Bog Trip". They observe the plants and berries around the bog and then take a look inside the ice at the many insects under the water. The author and his students also make time for fun, inventing a makeshift hockey rink and playing guitar in the cabin.

In "January 6 A Discussion", the author notices that he may be a little odd for always hauling around road kill in the back of his pick up truck. He notices that his environmentalist students also stick out like a sore thumb in this part of Maine.

In "Excursions", the author and one of his students pull up samples of insects from below the ice in the stream. He is surprised by how much life is down there. The author takes the students to a river area on the Maine-New Hampshire border. They explore a bog and a lake. The bald eagles that make their home here are endangered because of high quantities of mercury and PCB in the water. On their way back to the car, they find a moose and many tiny spiders ambivalent to the cold.

There is a huge snowstorm in "January 13". The author's students work on their projects individually. He happens upon a graduate student who drove up to the cabin for a visit. That night the author cooks mice for the students. Surprisingly, they all enjoy eating the mice.

In "January 20 Coyotes", the author is alone again. He happens upon a man who is chasing and killing coyotes with his dogs. At first he is upset but then recognizes it as the circle of life.

The author experiments with beetle grubs in "January 25 Sweet and Sour Grubs". He is intrigued that they don't seem affected by the extreme cold. He takes them from a tree and into his house where he heats them up. For several days, they act dead and do not move. The finally they wake up, but when exposed to the cold again, they die immediately.

The author believes he may be wanted as an eco-terrorist in "The Spiker". The author accidentally took some spikes out of a tree that belonged to the logging company. He then thinks of some bizarre encounters that he recently had with the logging company and decides they must be watching him, thinking he is the eco-terrorist. He tells his friends and family about this. They laugh at him but also note that he would definitely fit their description.

In "January 31", the author must deal with extreme cold weather as well as the return of the mice. The only thing that gets him out of his cabin is his work observing the ravens. He feels he doesn't need more adventure than what he already has observing the plants and animals around the cabin.

"February 2" is Groundhog Day. The snow has been piling up and the weather stays bitterly cold. A local guy plows the driveway for the author and his neighbors.



Cows, Early February, March 13 Storm Warnings, March 14 Storm, March 14 After the Storm, March 16, Spring, March 20-21 First Tappers, March 23, March 25 Birch Seeds

Cows, Early February, March 13 Storm Warnings, March 14 Storm, March 14 After the Storm, March 16, Spring, March 20-21 First Tappers, March 23, March 25 Birch Seeds Summary and Analysis

In "Cows", the author has gone into town to have a meal at the diner. There he finds a lead for some dead cattle that he can feed to his ravens. When he arrives at the barn, he finds that the cow is already rotten and too far gone for his birds. The farmer does have some dead calves though, so the author loads those into his truck. The farmer says that most people use the dead calves to bait coyotes, viewed as pests in Maine.

In "Early February", the author finds the tree spikes that he thought had been confiscated by the logging company. It turns out he always had them and was never suspected of being an eco-terrorist.

A big storm is about to descend on the Maine woods in "March 13 Storm Warnings". The people in town are stocking up for the storm but in a great mood. Gradually it begins to snow and the wind comes in heavy gusts.

The storm has arrived in "March 14 Storm". The author stuffs the cracks of his cabin while the storm blows snow right inside. He tries to go outside in the storm and is amazed at all the sounds of the wind, trees, and snow blowing across the twigs. In the morning, he goes down to the raven's feeding spot. The author is beginning to feel "cabin fever".

In "March 14 After the Storm", the author goes into town again to have breakfast at the diner. He jokes around with the townspeople. He goes for a walk in his snowshoes and observes the tracks of many different animals. He still listens intently for the sound of the kinglet.

Though the weather is still cold in "March 16", the author can see the tracks and furrows of many animals. As the sun comes out, he searches for raven's nests in the trees.

In "March 20-21 First Tappers", the author notices some strange behavior from squirrels. He sees them licking some select maple trees while others they bite into, leaving deep puncture marks. He concludes that the squirrels have developed a way to make their own maple syrup, biting down into the bark to allow the sap to escape, then waiting for the water to evaporate and returning to lick the syrup. The author decides to make maple syrup with his neighbor. He ponders about the first Native Americans who discovered how to make syrup. Had they also learned that from watching the squirrels?

In "March 23", the author begins the sugar-making operation. He thinks of all the work that went into the process and sits back and relaxes once everything is done.

The author describes the tiny birch seeds in "March 25 Birch Seeds". The tree sheds five million seeds during a season. He ponders the rare odds of life for a birch seed.

March 30 Cocoons, March 31, April 2 Dreams, April 3 Ice Fishing, April 4 Returns, April 8, April 11, April 20

March 30 Cocoons, March 31, April 2 Dreams, April 3 Ice Fishing, April 4 Returns, April 8, April 11, April 20 Summary and Analysis

In "March 30 Cocoons", the author finds an old cocoon from a moth. He dissects it and discovers a great deal about the moth's development in the cocoon and his escape. The author then returns to the woods to look for other cocoons and finds six, where all of the moths had died. They had been invaded by parasites like wasps who lay their eggs and then eat the moth pupa.

The author describes the awakening life in "March 31". The snow has begun to melt and water is flowing again in the brook down the hill. The author sees the white ground studded with tiny seeds, which depend on luck and ideal conditions to make it from a seed to a full-grown tree.

In "April 2 Dreams", the author remembers a couple dreams from nights before. In one he sees a huge barred owl staring at him. In another very detailed dream, he is looking for a place to rest but is suddenly swept away by gentle elephants. When the elephants disappear, the author notices that the ground is covered with meat. Humans feed the meat to dogs who then become viscous and must be killed. When he wakes up, he notices that the weather has become warmer and the ravens are playing outside his door.

The author and his neighbor Bill go ice fishing in "April 3 Ice Fishing". A fellow fisher helps them drill holes and the two men sit quietly all day, not catching much. Towards the end, they catch some catfish, perch, and pickerel. The author sketches the fish when he gets them home, then cooks them for dinner.

In "April 4 Returns", the author spends the night boiling sap to make maple syrup. He reads a book and marvels at the universe. The author drives to a farm to get a dead calf for his ravens and asks the farmer about the birds he has observed. On the way home, he watches some playful ravens on the side of the road.

In "April 8", the author visits a dairy farm to check out some a raven's nest. The farmer also sells some trees here and there to make money. Back at the cabin, the author meets with the lumber company and is quite proud about the progress of his cutting. In his apple orchard he notices that below the snow, the mice had been active at gnawing away on the bark of the trees.

It rains all day in "April 11".

The author notes how many activities and responsibilities he has taken on in "April 20". All of these things make his life move so quickly. It may seem as if he is doing nothing, but his days are really quite full.



April 21, April 28, April 28 Free Search, May 2, May 4 Smelting, May 6 Metamorphosis, May 7, May 14 Fishing, May 15 Weeds in Huckleberry Bog, May 24 Graduation

April 21, April 28, April 28 Free Search, May 2, May 4 Smelting, May 6 Metamorphosis, May 7, May 14 Fishing, May 15 Weeds in Huckleberry Bog, May 24 Graduation Summary and Analysis

In "April 21", the author and his son, Stuart, take a walk in the woods. They watch a woodcock fly up into the sky and then circle back down to the ground. The father and son talk about why the bird might be adapted to do that. The author notes the changing seasons and decides his favorite season is always the current one.

The author drives his son back to Vermont in "April 28". Along the way, he sees the first flowers of spring. Soon the flowers will also come to his hill in the woods.

In "April 28 Free Search", the author goes on a nature walk without looking for anything in particular. In the stump of an old maple he finds many wide, deep grub holes. Then he stumbles upon two moose. He hears all kinds of birdcalls and sees some frogs by the creek. He sees the nests of a few types of birds then continues on. Near his cabin he finds a female bumblebee and follows her on her search for food.

The author takes a trip to Bog Stream in "May 2". While paddling along in a canoe, he observes a few different types of ducks. As the sun goes down, he hears all types of frogs and notes the way these animals join in and fade out like a chorus.

The author seeks out a friend, Bill, to go fishing with him in "May 4 Smelting". When he goes to find Bill, Bill is out, so the author shoots some hoops with a neighbor boy. When Bill returns, the two set out to go smelting. Bill has been advised of a stream up the road where the fish are running. When the two get there, it is a perfect night but no fish can be found. They conclude that the local smelters only let other fishermen know about the run after it has gone on a few days and they have caught their fill.

In "May 6 Metamorphosis", the woods have suddenly turned green and the birds have returned. The author observes the nests of warblers, magnolias, juncos, robins and blues. He notes that the most successful nest builder's have evolved to place their nests in the most unlikely places.

In the section "May 7", the author observes a few more nesting birds and notes their mating rituals are starting to end. He notices a caterpillar swinging by on a thread of silk. He writes about the silks many uses for insects and how humans in turn use it to make clothing and parachutes.

The author and his friend Bill go fishing in "May 14 Fishing". He is quite happy to hear the return of more and more types of birds. He also observes the trees and the colors of their blossoms. Bill, his two sons, and the author set out to go fishing for white perch. They have heard there will be a good run tonight and this is the spot to catch them. Once there they do not catch much fish and Bill admits that he hasn't caught any in this spot for a long time. The author takes home and cooks the fish they have caught, also perch, but considered trash fish. On the way up to the cabin, the author finds a firefly larva, which he is surprised to find glows just like the adult.

The author takes a trip to his favorite place in "May 15 Weeds in Huckleberry Bog". When he arrives at the bog, he notices that beech and sugar maple trees are not blooming this year. He concludes that the two trees have co-evolved to both have off years where they do not bloom and therefore do not produce any food for their predators. This keeps the population of their predators, birds, rodents, and beetles in check. On the way out of the bog, the author discovers piles of trash, bags of weeds that have been discarded by some polluter.

In the last section, "May 24 Graduation", the author makes the trip back to his university to see his daughter and one of his doctoral students graduate. He finds himself happy to be there and partake in the graduation rituals. After, he returns back to the cabin with two students and his son, Stuart. The author shows Stuart how he can use a dead mouse to lure in a beetle and Stuart sets to work with youthful excitement. In the last few paragraphs of the book, the author and his son visit a swimming hole near his favorite diner. While swinging out on the rope above the river, the author concludes that of all the places he has lived, this cabin in the Maine woods is his home.

Characters

The Author

The author of *A Year in the Maine Woods* is Bernd Heinrich and he is the principal character. Heinrich is a Professor of Zoology at the University of Vermont. He grew up all over the world and developed a love of the natural world at an early age. He was taught to love the outdoors by his father, who collected beetles and spent a lot of time in nature.

Heinrich decides to spend one year at his cabin in the Maine woods in order to study ravens, beetles, the trees, and the plants that are all native to that region. When he first comes up to the cabin in the summer, he brings a pet raven with him, named Jack. Heinrich has a passion for the ravens and enjoys watching them and hunting down road kill and dead farm animals to feed to them.

Heinrich is a naturalist and yet he is also very practical. He enjoys hunting and fishing and is not opposed to logging. When he wants to understand a plant or animal, he will go to great lengths, observing it, capturing it, dissecting it, and even eating it. Heinrich spent a lot of time in the woods around his cabin as a child and knows all of the long-time residents, so he is no stranger to his environment. He is fascinated by the natural world and is often making new discoveries simply by being a very careful observer. For instance, he discovered that red squirrels were making their own maple syrup by puncturing the tree with their teeth and then waiting for the sap to evaporate, leaving tasty syrup for the squirrels.

While spending a year at the cabin, the author also takes up running long distances to get himself in the marathon-shape of his younger years. He is a hard worker and spends hours doing very difficult and strenuous manual labor to ready his cabin for winter.

The author is a quiet person who feels comfortable spending lots of time by himself, but he is also not a recluse. He spends time talking with friends, family, and makes regular trips to the diner to catch up on the latest local gossip. Heinrich also becomes very attached to plants, animals and his favorite places. To him, they become like friends.

Jack

Jack is a raven that the author captures at the beginning of the book. The author drives with Jack up to the cabin in Maine. Along the way, the bird provides company for the author and he thinks of Jack as his traveling companion.

Once at the cabin, the bird begins to progress from adolescent to adult. The two take walks together and the author observes Jack's playful behavior. One day, it seems Jack may be dead, because the author hears a hunter's rifle shot and then Jack is nowhere



to be found. He eventually comes home, but the author can see that Jack is becoming an adult and gaining independence.

The author is a raven expert, so he takes an interest in Jack's behaviors and developments. He is especially interested in how the raven learns about predators. When Jack has an encounter with a dog, he is not scared and the two have a playful encounter. However, a few days later, Jack tries to act the same with a cat and is almost stalked and killed. Right in front of the author's eyes, Jack learns how to evade a predator.

The two develop a strong bond. Jack will sit in the author's lap while he rubs his head. It is like the relationship between dog and human more than human and bird. When Jack does finally fly away forever, the author still thinks of him often and looks for him whenever he sees a raven. The author even has a dream about Jack being young again and letting him rub his head.

Stuart

Stuart is the author's nine-year-old son. The author and his son's mother are divorced and Stuart lives with her but he comes up to the cabin for frequent visits.

Stuart, like his father, is very interested in the natural world. He loves being up at the cabin and going on walks with his father. The author often worries about entertaining the boy when he visits, but Stuart is quite happy to observe the natural world and ask a lot of questions.

At Christmastime, the author drives to Vermont to see his son and visit his son's school to talk about his job. The author tells the children about all of the insects and birds he studies and Stuart is very proud of his father. Stuart then asks if he can be an assistant on his father's raven project.

The Adams

The Adams are the family that originally settled in the area around the author's cabin. They are a family that can trace their history in the region back until 1769. The author remembers the family growing up and he is still friends with the descendants, Bill and Millie Adams.

Ron and Syndi

Ron and Syndi are the author's neighbors and they live at the bottom of the hill. The author transforms Ron and Syndi's outhouse into a telephone booth. When it comes time to make maple syrup, Ron and the author work on sugaring together.



The author's father

The author talks about his father in memories. He remembers walking with his father in the woods, collecting mice and beetles for his father's collection.

Erica

Erica is the author's college-age daughter and attends the University of Vermont. She visits him at the cabin occasionally. The author attends Erica's graduation and congratulates her on stage where she is awarded a prestigious fellowship and the highest honors degree.

The Winter Ecology Class

A group of about a dozen students comes up to the cabin in late December for an intensive fifteen-day Winter Ecology class. The author notes that most of his students are environmentalists with Earth First t-shirts. Each student creates their own individual study, but the group bonds through the shared-experience of the class.

Maple Tree

The author marks the changing of the seasons with the color of the maple tree. In the spring, the leaves are pale green and they have tiny red buds. In the fall, the trees change the most dramatic colors of any in the woods. The author notices that in the fall, the tree determines the color of each leaf, and though there is variance from leaf to leaf, each individual leaf stays the same color until it falls off.

Ravens

The author observes ravens over the course of his year at the cabin. He feeds the ravens that congregate near his hill road kill and dead cows and calves he is able to get from local farmers. The ravens are very playful and he describes their behavior as if they are young children.

Beetles

Beetles are fascinating to the author. He studies them at all stages of their development. There are many types around the Maine woods. The author's son Stuart even experiments with a dead mouse to find the very rare burying beetle.

Objects/Places

Lichen and Moss

Lichen and moss are organisms that can grow almost anywhere. They can survive in any type of climate because they are completely self-contained. The author enjoys looking at the lichen and moss as fall changes to winter. He observes it on every possible surface, rocks, fallen trees, and even the bare ground. He loves the intricate patterns of the growth and the variations of colors.

Bogs

A bog is a wetland where there is water on the surface and a thick layer of dead plant material underneath. The author visits several different bogs near and far from his cabin in the book. When he goes to the bogs, he always observes the types of plants growing berries if there are any. He also like to wade into the bog a little and see what animals and insects may be lurking below the surface.

Eco-Terrorists

An eco-terrorist is someone who tries to disrupt human exploitation of the environment. The community in Maine where the author lives in the site of a lot of logging operations. There are some who seek to try to destroy the logging equipment so that the trees can be saved. For a little while, the author believes that the logging company may think he is an eco-terrorist because he had tree spikes in his truck.

The Diner

The author goes to the diner when he needs some light-hearted conversation and some companionship. He also likes to go there to get coffee and breakfast when he doesn't want to cook at home.

Storms

Throughout the winter, there are several large storms that dump tons of snow on his hill. During these storm, the author ventures out to see the woods and the animals. He is surprised how loud the storms can be and sometimes they wake him up at night. It is impossible for him to keep the snow out of the cabin as it blows in through tiny cracks.



The Cabin

The author's log cabin is built at the top of Adams Hill in the Maine woods. He spends most of the summer winterizing the cabin by rolling rocks under the foundation and stuffing the cracks of the cabin to keep the wind out. Still in the winter, the snow blows inside in drifts.

Seeds

The author writes frequently about the seeds of maple, ash, and beech trees. He is interested in the unique methods each tree has developed to disperse the seeds to ground.

Red Squirrels

Red Squirrels are very common in the Maine woods. The author spends a lot of time observing them and how they create stashes of food for the winter. During his observations, he realizes that the squirrels actually make their own maple syrup.

Black Flies

These large flies make a home in the cracks in his cabin during the winter. Though they are supposed to hibernate during the winter, when his cabin heats up, the flies come out. The author spends hours "dustbusting" up tens of thousands of flies.

Webb Lake

Webb Lake is a large lake near the hill where the author lives. The Webb family is a farming family and they still live there.

Alder Stream

Alder Stream is the small creek that flows at the bottom of the hill. The author goes there frequently to look at the plants and animals down there. In the winter, the creek is frozen and does not flow, but at the first sign of spring, the water begins gushing again.

Apple Orchards

An apple orchard is an area where only apple trees grow. Apple orchards are frequent in the book. The author has his own small orchard near his cabin. When he is out hunting or going for a walk, he will often stumble into the remains of an orchard some pioneer left behind. He is always interested in the ecosystem around the apple orchard.

Jay

Jay is a town a little up the way from the author's hill. He goes there frequently for supplies. It is also where his friend Bill lives.

Themes

The Circle of Life

The Circle of Life, or the theme of death and rebirth, is a very important concept in *A Year in the Maine Woods*. While the author is walking around his property or in the nearby woods, he often finds evidence of the people who came before him. Sometimes it may be the remains of an old farmhouse. Other times he finds small cemeteries with names of children from families who settled the region. These early settlers came, built houses, created orchards, chopped down forests, and then they were gone, dying or moving to another place. The author repeats those same activities in the present day, building his cabin, clearing an apple orchard, and logging in the forest. And so, like those pioneers who left the traces of their lives, one day all of the author's work will also be traces found by future generations.

This theme of the circle of life also extends to the insects and birds that the author spends so much time observing. He often notes that the parasitic beetle will invade the cocoon of a moth or butterfly. It lays its eggs on the cocoon, and when the eggs hatch, the young feast on the remains of the moth. This is a microcosm of death bringing about new life. This is also true in the forests where the author walks. He finds a forest that has been logged and all the old-growth trees have been removed. However, it is only at this point that younger, smaller trees will have a chance to absorb the sunlight that never reached them before. They grow and thrive and the forest begins anew.

Evolution

The author is fascinated by evolution in the book. He loves to discover the little niches that plants and animals carve out for themselves. These little things seem odd to the outside observer, and yet when one looks at the pressures of their environment, one can begin to understand why the species evolved the way it did.

For instance, when spring arrives, the author notices that no beech or sugar maples are blossoming that year. He remembers that last year the trees blossomed more than average, and as a result, the insects and birds that feast on the seeds grew fat and numerous. If the trees blossomed like that every year, their predators would overwhelm them. So every few years the trees do not blossom at all, which has the effect of whittling down the population of the insects and birds. There is all this magnificent cause and effect and yet, not a word is uttered. The trees have simply evolved to know this is the year of no blossoms.

The author also notices evolution in animals. He wonders how salamanders might make their way up the hill and to a wet spot near his cabin. The species has evolved to travel, sometimes very long distances. This is a dangerous journey that might get them killed. Yet, for the survival of the species, each individual is driven to make this journey. There

is no consciousness in the species; evolution drives them to take these risks. The author is interested in how evolution can make plants and animals do things that would seem counter-productive but actually ensure the survival of the species.

Man versus Nature

It would be impossible to have a story that describes one man's year spent living in the woods without having the theme of man versus nature. In general, the author is quite comfortable in nature and does not struggle too much against it, but rather goes with the flow of the changing seasons and conditions. For him, the struggle comes in defending his home from unwanted critters. The mice gather in the rafters above his bed and scurry around all night. Though he traps them all, he cannot keep new ones from taking up residence in his roof. The worst natural element that the author must battle are the flies that live in the cracks in his walls. He had spent the summer trying to seal all the cracks, and yet the flies squirm their way in. When the weather has cooled down they hibernate, but the warm fires in his cabin wake them up. Therefore, the author is constantly battling the flies with his dustbuster, and as many as he captures, there are more to replace them. There is a futility in battling nature, because nature was there first and it always wins.

The eco-terrorist is another example of the theme of man versus nature. Well-meaning environmentalists want to prevent the logging companies from cutting down trees. The author observes several clear cuts where he believes he will see devastation from the large logging operation. Instead, he is surprised at how quickly the forest grows back. In fact, the smaller, younger trees are helped when the large trees are cleared out. The environmentalists want man to live in peace with nature instead of using and destroying it. The author observes that the act of humans interacting with the environment and using it for resources is natural and peaceful.

Style

Perspective

The perspective of *A Year in the Maine Woods* is almost entirely first-person. The book is written like a diary, a first-hand account of the things he experiences while living his life in the isolated Maine woods. However, towards the beginning he breaks this a little, instead doing a linear history of the Adams family, the first settlers of his property and the area around it. He tells who settled where, how many children they had, and the year in which the property changed hands. In this way, the perspective is almost that of the land, a passive observer who has seen many people come and go. Other than that, the perspective is only that of the author who writes what he saw, what he did, and the conversations he had along the way. Sometimes the author simply jots down notes, like a stream of consciousness. It does not seem as though anything he wrote was edited. There are few conversations, because he is mostly alone. Occasionally there is a flashback where the author remembers some experience like walking through the woods with his father. These parts are also told in the first-person. Sometimes he daydreams, and much of the story may be simply what he is working through in his head, whether it is the problem of the squirrels who make maple syrup or the problem of the moon orbiting around the Earth. Still, the reader is only in the confines of the author's experience, and so this is certainly told from the first person perspective.

Tone

The author's tone is really quite ambivalent throughout *A Year in the Maine Woods*. He tells the reader what happened in a very matter of fact tone. For instance, when he spends time with his children, he only describes what goes on, what was said and what was done. One never gets a sense of the author's emotions or how he feels about other people.

The author also adopts a very matter of fact tone when discussing things that might make readers squeamish or sad. He describes eating bugs and mice as if it is just a normal, everyday thing that people might eat. He even seems to be surprised by his students' reluctance to eat fried mice. It is as though he does not always fully understand others'

emotions because he is so flat and indifferent.

The author also has an encounter that might make the reader very sad, but he seems to be uncaring. He returns to his childhood school, a place filled with memories, to offer a traditional Christmas up on his hill to the disadvantaged children. He looks around at the surroundings, but does not seem to express any emotions, only the observations of how things have changed. When he is turned down on his offer, he does not seem disappointed in the least but rather very unemotional. In another encounter, the author

learns that a hunter is using his dogs to tear apart coyotes. For a moment it seems as though he may be sad about this, but in the next moment he has rationalized it and again goes back to an ambivalent attitude.

Structure

The structure of *A Year in the Maine Woods* is mostly like a diary, a catalog of the author's experiences. The book is broken up into sections marked with a date, or a date and a subject, or sometimes only a subject. Each section can vary in length a great deal, anywhere from a paragraph to four or five pages. Most of the time the author simply describes what he did during the course of a day. Some sections only deal with one subject and go into some detail about that subject. For instance, "Jack" is one of the longer sections of the book and it deals with the author and Jack's relationship through the summer as Jack gains independence and then one day sets out on his own.

In one early section of the book titled "Beginnings", the author simply catalogs a few words for each day: "May 31-June 2: Settled into camp. Played with Jack. Cut firewood. Many white flowers." Strangely, he still writes more detailed explanations of these days in subsequent chapters. He also does not repeat this particular way of writing again. This tends to give the book a haphazard and unorganized feel, which may in fact mimic his surroundings in the Maine woods. Though it is like a diary, some themes are repeated again and again through different sections, such as evolution and the life stages of plants and animals.

The book is also interspersed with little drawings of seeds, fish, or beetles. Whatever is on the author's mind might be jotted down in the form of a detailed pencil drawing.

Quotes

"Of all they built, only the stone walls, crumbling wells, and barn and house foundations still remain as visible reminders."

Adams Hill, p. 10

"A lot of what exists in these woods cannot be seen from my red spruce. Most of the lives around us go on unnoticed. They leave no records."

Adams Hill, p. 15

"Trees are our lifeblood, in more ways than one. And that is the problem. There are woods, and there is wood, and the two have different uses."

Scrap Lumber, p. 22

"Everywhere there is a hurry, and little time for dallying, or grieving."

The Urgency of Spring, p. 31

"As I look across the landscape and 'see' mountains rising out of the earth, being eroded again to leave plains, and then rising again while the continents drift about, the only permanence I see is in life itself."

Bedrock, p. 47

"Evolution works on percentages, not guarantees."

August 6 Late Summer Ramblings, p. 60

"We pride ourselves on knowing what the insects do not know. Yet how many things do we do for the same blind reasons of enhanced survival, all the while just as ignorant of their meaning."

August 6 Late Summer Ramblings, p. 60

"Consciousness allows us to visualize the consequences before we physically experienced the cause, and a person without consciousness would be disadvantaged relative to one with it."

Flying Samaras and Consciousness, p. 110

"But what I see tonight with ten times magnification is almost frightening. Some mysteries are a little too daunting for an average weeknight."

December 9 The Lunar Eclipse, p. 149

"You find new things by rambling, not by racing."

March 20-21 First Tappers, p. 203

"Nature abhors the superfluous, yet is constrained to produce the seemingly extravagant."

March 25 Birch Seeds, p. 207

"The moth's descendants were now already encased in other cocoons. Like many of us, the moth had by its constructions achieved an immortality of sorts. Immortality was nothing that it cared about. I wonder why we do."

March 30 Cocoons, p. 209

"As in all living things, each creature does it its own way, and very small, perhaps almost random selective pressures may start a cascade in one direction that, once started, continues on its own momentum to ever greater differentiation and perfection."

March 30 Cocoons, p. 211

"The 'decision' of the two tree species not to bloom was not arrived at this spring. It already had been made by last fall when the buds were formed."

May 15 Weeds in Huckleberry Bog, p. 249

"Nature provides the greatest entertainment on earth, and we had watched a flawless live performance that had been rehearsed on warm summer days and evenings for at least 60 million years."

May 24 Graduation, p. 257

Topics for Discussion

How is the salamander the author finds in the woods an example of evolution?

Does the author approve of the logging operations in Maine woods? What does he think is good or bad about logging?

Describe the author's attitude towards hunting animals. Does his attitude change depending on the animal or the circumstances? For instance, deer hunting versus moose hunting versus coyote hunting.

Why do you think the author becomes uncomfortable during the lunar eclipse when he can gaze through his binoculars and see the Milky Way?

Give an example of co-evolution in the book.

Why do you think the author is so surprised to find bags of weeds in the Huckleberry Bog? Could this be an example of "one man's trash is another man's treasure"?

Discuss how the author sets about describing something. How many layers of observation is he satisfied with? What can he discover by using his unique method of trying to understand the world?