

*Reading Nature: Reading the Forest Landscape* by Tom Wessels (Woodstock, VT: Countryman Press, 1997).

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During my walk in the woods the other day, with the leaves and underbrush gone for the winter and the snow covering the ground, what I noticed most were the trees, dark against the white. But more than the living trees, what grabbed my attention were the fallen trunks and stumps that broke the vertical line of the forest. I stopped to look closely at one stump that had become little more than a barkless column with a jagged top. It might seem impossible to know what kind of tree it had been, but I knew where to look for a possible answer: Tom Wessels' book *Reading the Forested Landscape*.

Each chapter of the book begins with an etching of a forest landscape that presents some problem and from this etched landscape Wessels draws a story that focuses on a particular kind of knowledge. In one chapter, for example, he explores why medium-sized trees might be missing from a forest. After eliminating disease and blowdowns based on clues in the forest, he settles on either logging or fire as the cause of the problem. Through a process of forest forensics, which he explains as he goes, he concludes that fire killed the missing trees. He finishes the chapter discussing the history of fire and forests, describing how Native Americans used controlled burns to manage the precolonial forest.

This combination of information and narrative makes the book both useful for identifying natural occurrences and fun to read. For Wessels reading the landscape is not simply about identifying patterns, it is about seeing the stories. He notes that "Sometimes these stories are difficult to read; through time nature's editing becomes bolder and parts of the tale are lost." Part of the thrill is solving the mystery. Although the book's subtitle is "A Natural History of New England," Wessels explains that these mysteries appear in any North American woodland, and the landscapes he describes are easily recognizable to anyone the wooded mountains of northern Pennsylvania.

Part of what makes time spent in the forests of the Endless Mountains so appealing is that the landscape was not designed for our entertainment the way an amusement park is. In such a place everything the user needs to know is immediately apparent: one pays here, sits there, and then the event happens and ends on schedule. The forest, on the other hand, is full of surprises, and the surprises are not spoiled by knowing more about what is going on: they get better. Time spent in the forest not only stretches the body, it also stretches the mind and gets us not just outside but outside ourselves.

Wessels' book is a good read that also reveals clues to events hidden in our landscape. Home from the walk, I got the book out and looked for stumps rotted from the inside out. It may be an American Chestnut; Wessels gave me more evidence to search for to be sure it is not an oak. The game is afoot.