

Backwoods, brooksides yield fleeting glimpses of nature

By June W. Kennedy

The late John Gagnon, once the town assessor and an avid naturalist, several years ago offered his insight into a Westford that is fast disappearing:

“I’m not an expert on wildlife. I’m just a man who has always traveled the woodland paths and waterways — places most people don’t think to go or even know about. I’ve always been interested in wildlife.

“At one time part of the town was covered with a substantial pine forest (the King’s Pine). Probably the upper half of the hills were covered with oaks and chestnuts. The lower lands were no doubt dressed in maple, elm and swamp maple.

Larch was not a common tree then, but there was sufficient quantity of it and some red pine. Some of the early prized floors were made from the very hard, reddish tone larch. I know of a few over the line in Acton today, but I don’t know of any larch in Westford today.

“We are blessed and cursed with two major watersheds in town, Nashoba and Stony Brook. Both basically have a gravel base. Much of this gravel has great commercial value and is being harvested and sold out of town.

“At first the area is left most unsightly, but nature soon takes over with golden rod and some ragweed. Then the pin cherry starts to grow, gray birches and poplars. From then on it’s a general increase toward an adult forest.

“There is one point where you can take a pail of water and dump it; one half of it will go to Stony Brook and the other half will go to Nashoba. You will find two different kinds of plants in the two valleys. Nashoba, being colder and more acid, has an entirely different type and species of flower and grasses than does the Stony Brook Valley in the north end of town.

“Along the Nashoba Brook area one finds marsh marigold (cowslips) — a bright yellow flower that grows right in the water. You can stand on the shore and look down at the brook and it looks as if somebody had planted a garden.



THE LATE JOHN Gagnon is pictured at the microphone of a town meeting several years ago in which he successfully promoted his innovative wild-flower protective bylaw, which today fines anyone digging and removing flora from Westford land without the owner’s permission. (File photo)

When you see these happy flowers, spring is here.

“Blue flag, which is an iris, grows in clumps along the Nashoba and its tributaries. A few pitcher plants are there. *Plymponia Boralis*, called bead lily, is very pretty in bloom. It’s yellow with a slight touch of green on it. Later the seeds resemble dark blue porcelain beads.

“March cinquefoil, the only red cinquefoil in the United States, is found in Nashoba. Also a great variety of blue, pink and white asters and the violet (high in vitamin C and the pheasants like them) are found here. Abundant too are thickets of royal fern which are 5-6’ high and a few remaining cranberry bogs.

“Stony Brook is a rather slow moving water. There is a great drop between its headwaters in Forge Pond and where it leaves Westford at the Chelmsford line. These drops were made by the creation of dams to control the flow of water for the worsted mills, a major industry along the brook.

“With the washing of the imported wool, embedded with seed, came the introduction of the purple loosestrife whose solid purple masses border the Stony Brook today. It’s a beautiful but very coarse plant that chokes everything else out.

“Also along this valley one will find single-petaled rose bushes ranging from 2-4’ high and which bear rose-hips in winter. High in vitamin C, they originated in England and were planted along our seacoast during the sailing days to prevent scurvy. Westford rose hips are smaller than the coastal ones; birds feast on them in winter.

“Highly prized in town are the pink, yellow and white lady’s slippers. They belong to the orchid family and are on the conservation list. Look! Enjoy! But please do not pick!!”

June W. Kennedy is a Westford resident and author of ‘Westford Recollections’, a book of historical vignettes and photos.