

Thoughts on a late fall ATV ride

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I've always loved the woods through all its seasons. My childhood summer days were spent climbing old, twisted branches of lofty trees, wading through the murky waters of the Yahara River, catching snakes, turtles and waterbugs, along with watching tadpoles grow into frogs along the ragged shores of the pumphouse pond.

I marveled at how winter changed my woods; deep snow blanketed every forest surface—shiny ice crystals dripping off the tree branches always demanded a close look. I wondered how warm the rabbits were, hiding inside their snow-insulated boughs of field grasses. Many hours were spent searching out and identifying different tracks left by animals scampering across the snow.

Fall never disappointed either. The shorter days always grew an unforgettable array of colors throughout the forest. I found new hues every year and attempted to name them all. My aquatic friends slowed down then and became scarce as they sought out their winter homes.

I felt insignificant as I stood under the ancient stand of maples, their once brilliant leaves whirling around me on a descent to the dirt floor. I can still smell that crispness in the air mingled with the decay of mature grasses and wet leaves.

Many years have since passed and this old body finds it much more enjoyable to explore the woods using my Wildcat (ATV vehicle). And although I love the companionship of other riders, there is something restorative about riding alone once in a while—and today seems perfect for it.

No one is out today, so I have the trails all to myself. The solitude is priceless – the deep staccato hum of my engine proves soothing to my overloaded mind as I make my way along the winding trails. It's a beautiful sunny day and I'm having fun as I push my machine through its different paces. The hills, gullies and ravines of the rolling terrain are finally revealed through the naked fall woods.

I can always smell logging before I get to it. Swirling fall leaves carry the fragrance deep into the forest where it entices me find its source. A jarring ride over sudden tractor ruts is the first clue I am close, and around the next corner I find the first of many downed trees. I am happy that they never knew there was a price on their heads. Stacked high and quietly waiting for transport, all they can do now is ooze out their earthy bouquet of pinesap and cut wood—as a raw reminder of what they once were.

A few lonely trees are all that remain on the once-forested slope. At their feet are the scattered remnants of their longtime neighbors.

This trail had a superb canopy just a few weeks ago—I don't even recognize the trail today.

Mom used to remind me that life changes, and not to dwell on changes long or I'd be stuck in the past. Her words ring true as I motor along through a hilly section of trail that was logged a few years ago. This oncebare trail is now densely bordered by softwood saplings, each in a race to reach the sunlight first. With their leaves gone, all I see is

a wall of gray spindly trunks but remember how their striking leaves drew me here on clear summer nights. Their young leaves are enormous and seem out of place on such slight trees. Each has a shiny dark green top contrasted by a pale matte underside, and their skimpy stems allow them to quiver in the slightest of breezes.

I've enjoyed some amazing summer nights parked on this hillside watching a shimmering lightshow over the valley as the moonlight bounced off these fluttering two-tone leaves.

I was just thinking about how relaxed I felt, when I noticed through the trees how low the sun was. This time of year, the end of the day comes around quick, so I decide to head home. I narrowly beat the darkness when putting my Wildcat away, and I wondered if this might be my last ATV ride for the season or not. All I know right now is that my ride put me in a good place and I'm ready for whatever comes next.