**Showcasing the DNR: The bucket list**

*“I’m trying to rock while I can rock, I’m trying to roll while I can roll,”* – Steve Forbert

**By JOHN PEPIN**

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About this time each year, when the angle of the sun starts to get higher and higher into the sky, and the days start dropping hints of late winter and springtime around the bend, I start thinking about things I want to do in the weeks ahead.

There are many things that I love to do that winter doesn’t afford opportunities to enjoy. I might still be able to get to some of these places, but the experience isn’t the same as it is during berry-picking time or the monarch butterfly migration.

In addition to the things that I generally presume I will be able to do, like trout fishing and camping, there are special things I have always wanted to do but have never done. I try to cross at least a few of these off my list every year.

The older I get, the more I hope I will be able to cross off the so-called “bucket list.” I want to try to pick up the pace of crossing things off. The way to do that is plan with intention, ahead of time – like now.

Last year, I was able to cross three significant items off my list that I am still enjoying reliving in my mind. These things were all new to me in some way.

I was able to visit a railroad bridge that I had only heard about and seen on maps and aerial photographs – a tremendous steel trestle that towers 104 feet over a wild river that crashes through a gorge below, during springtime’s high-water flows.

There are no railings on the nearly 600-foot-long structure, which must be eerie for engineers moving iron ore trains across the span, especially during stormy conditions or at night.

My trip out there with a friend on a hot summer afternoon reminded me of the investigations we set out on as young kids: walking cross ties, crossing railroad trestles, waving to passing engineers, putting pennies on the tracks, and even climbing up the steel ladder to check out the inside of open-doored boxcars.

We’d find rusty, railroad spikes and steel plates, get creosote from the railroad ties all over our clothes and chase grasshoppers back and forth across the steel rails. Just thinking about it, I can feel the warmth of the summer sun.

Those days also remind me of Stephen King’s “The Body,” known better to many as the movie “Stand by Me.” The movie is about kids on an adventure following a railroad line to see a dead body.

The remaining two places I visited were places I had been before, but not in many years.

I was able to visit a waterfall that I hadn’t seen since the early 1980s.

This place is very special to me because it is the very first place I ever remember seeing, smelling and touching a brook trout. I was fishing there with my parents. It was before my brother and youngest sister were born.

I am still enthralled with the deep, dark and foam-covered water of that place. I remembered so many details since the last time I had been there.

I recalled specific cracks in the granite boulders, trees that shaded my vehicle where I parked and the way the river split past the base of the falls and then rounded a big corner, and the beautiful black rocks that shouldered the splash pool carved out by the water.

I took many pictures when I visited most recently, which I have since looked at with fondness. It’s as though I can go there anytime now much easier, with these photos as reminding guides.

Lastly, I reconnected with an old woods road I had not been down since I had gone partridge hunting with my mom and dad when I was younger than 10.

I had remembered that the road ran through low areas where the water inundated the road and came through the floorboards of our old, blue Pontiac four-door.

I remembered being afraid of getting stuck out there in the mud or swampy water. The road had planks on a high hill prone to washouts. In my memories, the days were all rainy and cold when we were out there – that would line up with grouse hunting in the fall.

When I returned this past autumn, it was different being behind the wheel of the car, rather than disappearing into the big bench seat in the back as a kid. I recall having to hoist myself up to see out the window.

I followed whatever instincts I might have had driving into those woods. The road split in several places and I turned with the topography or where I thought the wear of the road seemed like I was heading in the right direction.

I stopped and walked barefoot to the top of a ridge line. I found wolf scat and on a later trip, tracks in the mud of the road. The smell of these woods made me drunk and dizzy. I love the smell of the autumn leaves.

The air was cold and sunk clear and clean into my lungs. I found my way across that road to another route connecting me to other places to explore. Some of these I recalled too from past days when my parents would take me for a “ride in the bush.”

I was very fortunate to have had parents who enjoyed nature and spending time outdoors in it. Growing up that way is perhaps the greatest thing they ever gave me, besides life.

On a somewhat random day that sticks out in my memories of last year, Da Coaster King and I spent a hot summer afternoon beating our way through the brush along trout streams in the eastern Upper Peninsula.

We happened to find a couple of trout, a patch of ripe blueberries on a south-facing, sunny hillside above the river and rapids and pools flowing through the grounds of an old fish hatchery. I also vividly remember netting a fish for him on the last day of trout season.

For the coming year, I hope to make it out to at least a couple of national parks, a few more of our Michigan state parks and camping and fishing in places where I have never been.

More specifically, there’s a couple of hikes that I have long wanted to take. Having lost my coronavirus weight gain over the wintertime, I am even more eager to head out on the trails.

One trail skirts along the bluffs and back side of a lake I have known my whole life, but only from three sides. It is this wild and rugged face I have yet to explore. In a similar fashion, there are numerous backcountry sections of the North Country National Scenic Trail that I hope to explore this summer.

A couple of these stretches also take visitors into the heart of the backcountry to storied wilderness areas I have only read about or maybe have seen a picture of. I want to experience those places for myself.

I also need to take some time to head down more dirt backroads that I have either long forgotten or never been, looking for more chance encounters with wildlife or places to let my mind roam free, breathe fresh air and see new sights.

It still astounds me how tremendously impactful something as simple as an afternoon hike up a gravel path with a sandwich, a drink and some nice weather can be. These types of outings can lead to days I can’t ever forget.

They sometimes end up filed away in my mind as “the day I caught that fish,” “the time I saw the bear,” or “that night when the meteor shower was happening on the way home.”

My list for the upcoming season is nowhere near completed. I am just getting started making it in serious fashion. I must remember to save room for some favorites, too, places I like to be at least once every year, if I can.

Like a lot of folks, I hope for better days ahead, more things left yet to do, many more firsts than lasts and highs over lows.

Today it will be a pen and paper that take me to these places mentally as I begin to compose my list.

Tomorrow, I intend to have my boots on the ground, taking in everything as much as I possibly can – keep on moving, getting as far as I can before the sun goes down.

*So long, New York. Howdy, East Orange.*

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