

Blindness

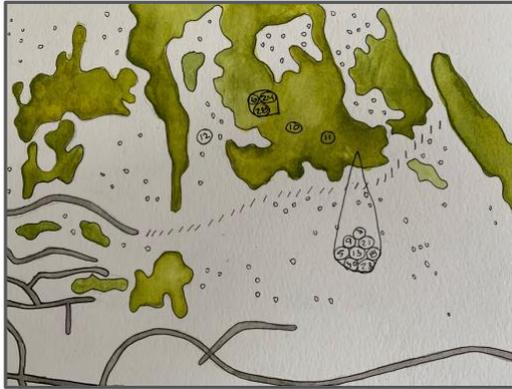
An Illustrated Essay

Situated on the south side of the South Thompson River, Juniper Ridge is a small neighborhood whose landscape exemplifies the environmental diversity of Kamloops.



Sagebrush and bunchgrass decorate the geometric rock hills that greet you on your drive up. Beyond, a dense forest of coniferous trees coat the hillside's dry ground before continuing out of sight. The forest's trails are vast but my shoes have imprinted their dirt far more times than I can count. In the nineteen years I have lived in this neighborhood, I have found myself growing tired of the dry grasses tickling my shins, and the tone of dark green contrasted against a sad gold. Each day I walk the trails with less intrigue and more boredom and find myself wishing for a landscape with more vibrancy, more diversity, and maybe just a little less bunchgrass. The sight of Mount Peter and Paul have become so familiar that my eyes no longer stop in admiration when I look out the window. I have become blind. I notice myself searching for new places to venture and filling by bucket list with areas far away that contain landscapes my eyes have not become accustomed to.

There is one trail in particular that I traverse often which connects Juniper to its close neighbor, Rosehill.



One side is lined by an unused fence whose rusty barbed wire bends low, while the other branches off to lead you further up the hill. I walk this trail for the sole purpose of giving my dog, Cromer, much needed exercise. He runs at top speed back and forth the moment we start walking and never seems to be having anything less than the time of his life. We could walk this same trail twice a day and his love for it would never fade, and that's when I realized: I had become unappreciative of a trail that provides me views like no other, ungrateful that I have a walking trail so close to my front steps, and blind to the diversity and richness of the nature that surrounds me.

That act of becoming blind to what's around us just because we see it on a daily basis is something that happens to a lot of. I want to get out of this mindset and truly see and feel my surroundings, and appreciate the land for all its capability and diversity. Mother trees that have spent decades reaching their stature, stand tall and wide while supporting those younger, and a wide array of wildlife call the hills home. Grassland environments here are so unique as they only cover less than one percent of British Columbia. Summer, fall, winter. With attention, each

of these seasons has the power to help get me out of this rut as with each change a new layer is brought to the landscape, and my focus is drawn to different aspects.

Summer. An uncomfortable heat beats through me, fatiguing my body within the first couple steps. With the wind at a complete standstill, the rays from the protruding sun combined with the insects create a humming noise. A noise characteristic of any Kamloops grassland landscape.

Summer is at its peak. Bunchgrass tickles my shins as I follow the strip of barbed wire fence to get to the trail head. Was it at this moment that I truly started to appreciate the grassland ecosystem? Plants like bunchgrass and sagebrush thrive in this plus thirty-degree weather, putting me to shame as I stop to wipe away the trickles of sweat that meander down my forehead. I live within a very unique and threatened ecosystem and I feel guilty for not giving it the gratitude it deserves. I feel bad for becoming numb to its beauty, and for disregarding it as a lackluster view.

Fall. I can sense the passing season in the air that no longer warms my skin, grasshoppers have claimed territory over the dried grasses and weeds, creating a symphony of unsynchronized chirps. My eyes are drawn to the ground in search for something still living. Shaded by the canopy created by the towering coniferous, species upon species of lichen and moss pull me in.



Freckle pelt lichen greets me with a raised and rounded limb; shaggy moss stays low as it creeps close to the forest floor; tube lichen finds its resting place on a long since fallen tree branch.

These moss and lichen have created their own ecosystem and bring an element of diversity to the forest that I had never noticed before. To think, I never would have given them my attention if it weren't for the fall weather erasing the colours of the summer plants.

The golden tones create a contrast against Mount Peter and Paul across the valley while the coniferous trees intercept the scene in a picture perfect manor. Being an arid landscape, Kamloops doesn't offer hills with warm tones of red, yellow and orange, instead you see alternating patterns of dark green and muted gold. Growing up in this area I have often longed for more colour. This year, however, a pair of deciduous trees edging the corner of the trail as it forks south have just enough of that typical fall colour to keep me content. They have begun to sense the beginning of the changing weather. The leaves slowly becoming casualties as the trunks steal their pigments, littering the earth's floor with their lifeless skeletons. Bones shattering with every foot step; *crunch*.

Winter. I am greeted with a harsh hello as chilled air claims the tip of my nose. Cupping my tattered mitts, I mask my face and let out an exaggerated breath, dissipating the tingles. Winter has arrived. With the ground covered in last night's snowfall, the once muted gold has been given a fresh coat of paint. The glistening white brings a smile to my face. But that quickly fades as I am abruptly reminded that Blundstones are not suitable for walking in snow. But with some fancy footwork and an impromptu solo dance, I swiftly land back on two feet and continue on walking.

The pair of poplar trees now stand naked, but there is a method to their streaking. Leafless, they no longer have the surface area to accommodate the fallen snow allowing them to stand bare and nutrient rich. The shorter days, colder temperatures and water restriction have put them in a dormant state, their growth halted as they await on the spring warmth. As I continue on, the snow brings my attention to the needles of a lone pine tree. Standing only five feet tall, this is definitely not its first winter but it still has some time before it will become a substantial part of the forest. Unlike its neighboring poplar, the pine's modified leaves are intact and the tree appears un-phased by the onset of winter; however, it is also in a state of dormancy. The long slender needles themselves may be too small to collect any fallen snow, but whirled together in a bunch, they provide the perfect resting place for snow before it hits the ground.



My trance is quickly broken by Cromer who is intrigued by what I am looking at. Before I know it, the small pine tree is bare as its snow falls in a state of slow-motion freefall making its way to the ground. If not for the snow clumping together on this small pine tree, I would have never stopped and observed. I would never have taken the time of day to admire not only this small tree's structure, but also thought about the mighty coniferous themselves; how much structure and health they bring to an ecosystem.

When we approach our familiar landscapes with a different mindset, look at them from a different angle, and visit them during different seasons, it will not be hard to find the beauty. This is not to say we shouldn't visit that far away lake we see photographed in the magazine, or dream of hiking to the top of that mountain to see the view. We should however, learn to appreciate what we do have in our backyard. Smile at the sunrise over the mountain you see from your balcony, relish in the beauty of the common flower that grows in the forest behind your house, and take in the uniqueness of the landscape you call home. We must not become blind to what we have right in front of us because we all live close to beauty; we need to be willing to open our eyes to it.

