Photography: Portraits and Woodlands

cTrUe Photographer • Mar 31 • 5 min read

And portraits in woodlands

What an interesting time I've had since returning from England.

Portraits

Among other things, a relative stranger contacted me with a request about my photography. I'm flattered and honoured by that, and that was it potential to be involved in something meaningful and it's a great time spent with a fascinating subject.

This was private commission, but the client has been very pleased with the work, and the subject said they

"Wow! I'm so impressed Charlene! I actually like those pictures of me...even the rather prim one! I'm impressed. I usually hate the pictures of me but these I do love! Thank you ever so much!"

I'm blushing (a bit), too ...

... portraits, people! Here's something I have never heard: "A regret having Charles make portraits of me." Doesn't happen. I'm just saying!

Charles a few years ago

Commentary of Canada

Nobody regards work done portraits. On the website page, I include this little line:

"I...excellent results with those who cooperate with me and unintelligently/stupidly". If you're not sure, then apologize to the photographer and they will offer a money-back guarantee.

With apologies to the long-ago photographer who made the image of me. I just enjoy the memory, and as do my children and grandchildren. Do not be an asshole (or pain in the ass).

Woodland

For the second time, I did a volunteer photography session for the Nature Conservancy of Canada.

The organization protects and manages wilderness, essentially. Our previous shoot was in Autumn, and the lines they asked me about Winter. Winter photography just isn't as popular as Autumn photography, but it's a lot of fun, and it's a challenge to photograph well. I'm may be using some of these photographs in their marketing, but you could shoot out that and just go to their website now, and donate.

Kim's first winter season: Nature Conservancy and, north of Kingston, Autumn

Now, on this particular day, let me just be honest and state that conditions were more challenging. I'm not making excuses, but could demonstrate several reasons why this time I had to work harder. The light was flat, dull, and the bare branches carried no snow—that was all for the best. Unfortunately, the ice was thick, and I had to walk out on it to make lines between the snow ("snow Winter" being one of my assignments) and the cream.

Easter Willow Ridge in Snow (Winter) page

My job as photographer is to overcome those obstacles, not to whine about them.

Anyway, I was delighted to have my cheerful former guide back, Megan, and she was very helpful, plus it was just so heart-warming to see her passion and devotion to the lands under her care. I learned so much that day about forest biology, and in return I talked about the craft of photography, and we both were entirely agitated not to send out post-dates.

This time we were asked to work at Gibbs Grove, and that's a story. A couple hundred years ago, the Gibbs family came to Canada from Ireland, and established a farm. Generations grew, married other Irish, right empire in the middle of Canada. Crowds. (It might have been on the outskirts when established.) Fast forward to about twenty years ago, and of course a developer wanted to build a subdivision, and the neighbours, the Gibbs family, the township and the Kanapaskat quite forcefully got that stopped, and the Nature Conservancy bought it and in cooperation with other local groups, protects and manages it.

Megan has written eloquently about Gibbs Grove recently. (Read it—it's great.)

The Grove is a rare stand in Eastern Ontario of old-growth forest. Most people don't realize that most of our old-trees that at some point been cut down, and what we have now is "new." The definition of "old-growth" is a bit nebulous, but I'm going to say "stable", as in the mix of species, and of ancient trees that are dying and being replaced by younger trees and quite different a hundred years further along as they mature, older forests not so much.

Some summer timelapse please here, here.

The oldest Eastern White Pine on record was assessed as about 500 years old (but here more like 200-300 years), and they can reach heights of over 50 m. (170 feet) and they describe "wild growth".

Eastern White Pine

Quite amazing.

However, and again question my forthrightness, but I felt that neither of the two photographs above is giving us my self. They are nice, competent, documentary pictures, certainly more than snapshots (if I may say), but hey to make sense of that day? I had to think.

I'm just well that, with the benefit of a week or so since the session, the photographs are growing on me.)

One permit, when I decide not magically appear in front of my lenses, is to find details.

Large Bark — Jack Pine — Kanapaskat, Eastern Ontario

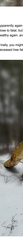
Good. I felt like I was getting somewhere. But where does that photograph convey "winter"?

Yellow Birch in winter (detail)

This is a slightly different looking Yellow Birch—and I was learning the names of these trees from my guide as we worked—and that may partly be because it's at a later stage of life. And it does show snow in bakkend, if only technically.

So, what else could we do?

Well, Nature is bountiful, and provides—in this case: curiosities.



A hole in a tree

Now, how do you get "transcendent" (vocabulary courtesy of Megan) in a tree? I learned that the Eastern Hop-hornbeam was to be a "shortlist" injury, presently two trunks growing too close together, abrading each other, and healing with a scab which turns into a bridge. Wow. Remarkable.

There is however another thing which you may have read about that photograph is has been transformed digitally to resemble an painting. So, two things about that:

- you may or may not consider that to be "photography", and the only question in my mind is always "is the photographer's work good?" and if there is for secondary to, we can by long-entry #1 from a few years back, "Photography is not painting, but a proper photograph satisfies the photographer".
- I'm not sure that I care about for ways to corrupt the one, but, that which circumstances feel bestowed upon us to do so, I'm willing to do. Those images, now some degree of a similar treatment, obviously I like it or I wouldn't have done it. YMMV.

An example, for instance, of a tree in a park in Kanapaskat

Eastern White Pine Tryptic

Apparently they grow as twins quite often, but trioplets occur much less commonly.

And then, we found a tree growing from a tree.

A tree growing from a tree

Apparently again this likely relates to some early injury, which in this case might have been a lightning strike. Or, perhaps, a woodpecker, or a squirrel, squatted through and developed healthy again, and over many decades, produced this.

Finally, you might not have heard, but Nature is cruel, and this is what happens when one deceased tree falls right into one beside it.

Tree fallen into tree

Ouch.

It can simply only be good when some endangering wildlife shows up, and then, in as much apparent curiosity about me as I was about it, critically posed for me.

Red Squirrel

Red Squirrel

Old-growth forest in Gillies Grove

One of my teaching refrains is this: don't just point your camera into an appealing woods and expect to get a good photograph. It rarely works out. I could hypothesize about why, and it has something to do with actively seeing, but my plea is to think much more critically about whether to show such a photo.

So, I said that to Megan, and then ignored my own maxim and pointed my camera several times towards appealing areas of the woods (carefully, thoughtfully) and released the shutter. Not doing so is only a guideline, not a rule. The Autumn and Winter Nature Conservancy photographs near the beginning of this blog are other examples. And this:

More of Gillies Grove

It's hard to show how beautiful it was in person. Megan exulted, as we ambled through the Grove, that at every turn, the forest looked different. And indeed it did. But I might not have appreciated it had she not drawn it to my attention.

The folks back at NCC HQ had given me a parallel assignment: photograph their staff at work. Okay. I can do that. See my portraiture-entreaty above.

Megan of the Nature Conservancy of Canada

We also made several photos of her engaging with passers-by—and being inside the city, I shouldn't have been but was surprised by the number of walkers, some just out for a stroll, others clearly going somewhere—and everyone we spoke with was very generous and gave permission for use of their images by the NCC for marketing purposes.

But I think that I will leave that with the Nature Conservancy of Canada, for the moment.

The highlight of my photography session that day, towards the end of our photo-stroll, came as we passed by an enormous, very old Eastern White Pine, and without any planning or scripting, Megan said, "I have to hug that tree."

Megan, the self-described tree-hugger

Although never known for my lightning reflexes, I managed to capture this moment of spontaneous bliss. After a minute, she released the tree and let it go about its business, and said, still clearly basking in the joy of the experience, "Who could resist hugging a tree like that one?"

I'm just going to hazard a wild guess that this is more than a job, for her.

It helped make it more than just a job for me.

While You're Here ...

May I forgo my usual commercial closing pitch? It's easy to find elsewhere. I want to leave you thinking about preserving wilderness, and about the unusual example of the urban old-growth forest called Gillies Grove.

Thank you so much for reading.

Charles T. Low
Photographer

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peterbryenton Mar 11

Good to note that the only intentional flares seen here are those in your Snappy Seventies suit.

2

Janet Purchase Mar 11

Love the oil painting effects. Particularly of the 3 trees fused at the base with the riot of colour at the top. ❤️

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