Our Day at The Pond

On April 24, 2003, the English 254 class walked around the pond just west of Skoglund Center. Each of us (14 students and 1 instructor) contributed 100 words—exactly—to our “report.”

Ground  We walk, run and drive on it. We dig it up and move it around, but how often do we pay attention to the ground? Walking down to the pond, there were grounds crew workers aerating soil up on the hill. However, down below where less people frequent the “natural” areas at St. Olaf, the ground was full of telltale signs. These natural blueprints record a pattern of movement simply with soft mud and footprints. With all the motion above ground, more apparent are the subterranean lives. Mole tunnels push up earth forming what look like veins belonging to a living ground.

Fate of Grass  He ran his hand through the tall grasses, like trailing a finger across a piano, and then he plucked one stalk, one key, one note, toyed with it, tasted its ring, and as it faded into the prairie horizon, he dropped it by the side of the road. Then he chose another, over and over again by the side of the road, like Hansel and Gretel leaving a bread crumb trail, like Jesus’s parable about the seed fallen on the path, the grains eaten by the birds, all of it demanding of me whether bird food was a less noble fate than grass seed. (Sasha TerMaat)

Trees  Clawing at the sky, dead trees huddle near the open water. In a week, they will be alive again, green with vitality. But today they are dark, cold, mysterious. In the transitory period from winter to spring, these trees are caught in an awkward stage, on the verge of new growth as a teen ready to blossom into adolescence. It is an eerie sight, to be able to look at a grove of trees and stare right through it. Stripped and bare by the winds of autumn and cold of winter, Skoglund Pond’s trees are vulnerable, yet aching for new life. (Mike Knoll)

Birds in Motion  The pond is infested with birds. Swallows, warblers, bluebirds, crows, hawks, and of course, ducks. No pond is complete without them. They leisurely float, speaking in low, guttural chuckles and quacks. In an uncoordinated flurry of wings, coots rise a foot off the water as they scoot to the other side of the pond. Halfway around now, a pair of mallards come from the north, their wings beating in quick, short, curved strokes. They circle once, circle again. Lower and lower. They set their wings, cupped and ready to land. A sudden uprising of activity and they splash down; disappearing from view. (David Strand)

Spring Birds  Spring has come to Skoglund Pond. Birds have begun to return from their winter homes. Some of them are here briefly as a stop on their journey north. Others are looking for the perfect place to nest. Swallows perch on birdhouses or dive through the sky. It is no surprise to see crows, whose large black wingspan and caw is familiar. Other birds fly by so quickly that they are unidentifiable. Warblers, finches, sparrows—they could be anything. Mallards, coots, teals, and other ducks float on the placid water. The signs of the birds prove that spring is really here. (Megan Frisk)

Sounds of Life  As we walked down to the pond one warm April morning, the campus was asleep. The only students awake were those who were headed off to their classes and even they hadn’t been up long enough for their coffee to kick in. Upon first glance the pond seemed just as weary. As we got closer sounds of life began to fill the air. Frogs calling out to us, sounding as if someone were running their fingers along a comb, birds chirping lightheartedly, and the sound of gentle splashing as the ducks skimmed the water while dancing along the pond’s surface. (Annie Bellew)

Noise  When I walk around campus I typically don’t notice the sound of nature …it is just background noise. However, when walking in the natural lands it is all but impossible not to hear Mother Nature’s orchestra. She starts her symphony gently, with the wind whispering through the prairie grass. The ripples of the water provide accents on the wind’s melody. Precisely on cue, the toads enter the symphony trumpeting rounds of high-pitched staccato notes until the baritones enter in their quacking, overpowering the trumpets at their forte. Gradually the baritones and trumpets diminuendo until only the background melody of the wind and water remain. (Erik Johnson)
A Winter Breeze  A barely noticeable breeze blowing and swirling across the top of the pond forming small waves on the water. Not hard enough to be blustery but enough to make noise as it rustles through the grass. It’s too weak to blow off my hat but strong enough to chill my hands, making them stiff. A cooling breeze tricking the body into thinking it’s cold in warm weather. Battling with the changing seasons, the cold breeze is the last wisp of winter before spring rolls into summer and winter disappears completely. (Case Martin)

Galls  I counted fifteen galls in a ten-foot stretch along the path through the natural lands. They were perfectly round and looked as if they were a natural anatomical structure of the plant. But these bulb-like additions to the plant stem were irritations caused by an insect. White, squishy grubs call these swellings home. They lay curled inside the gall all winter and emerge from their sphere for a day or two of rampant reproduction before their life cycle comes to an abrupt end. I cracked open a gall to peek at the creature, robbing him of his reproductive potential. (Leah Dvorak)

Frogs  The moment I stepped onto the land surrounding the pond I could hear them. Blowing on the cool breeze, their melody reached my ear. Low at first and then increasingly louder as I approached the water’s edge. So many voices joined together to create a constant lull. There was variety and yet somehow unity within them, background noise to the more prominent pond sounds of rustling prairie grass, quacking ducks, and chirping birds. So often overlooked, but always there as an essential part of the pond. Serenading us all the while we visited their pond, the frogs sang their welcome. (Kari Landenberger)

Overactive Imagination  Walking along the prairie grass meadow behind St. Olaf, I expect suspenseful music to start playing quietly in the background. Someone points out a small herd of gazelles grazing in the tall grass. The music grows in volume when we spot the tawny back of a lion. We watch helplessly as the terrified herd scatters and the lion singles out a gazelle on the fringe of the group. As the lion pounces, the theme music peaks and then all goes silent. The prairie grasses always remind me of the African Serengeti and that I watch too much TV. (Rebecca Peterson)

How it Smelled  As we ventured down to the Skoglund pond, I raised my nose up into the air, trying to capture various smells along the trail. The slight breeze often made it difficult as it brought an artificial odor from the Malt-o-Meal factory. As the smell of cereal diminished, traces of other natural aromas could be smelt. The south end of the pond brought the smell of trees and leaves mixed with the scent of pond water that one can only recall if they have been near a pond. On the north side, the sweet smell of prairie grasses lingered about. (Bryan Hapka)

Water Meets Land  There is a place at our pond where the water meets the land. Not where earth begins its upward slope from below, or where grasses grow around the perimeter, but the very cusp, razor edge, where earth cannot decide whether to be wet or dry. Algae inhabit this place and twigs sit locked in stagnancy, too low for the breeze, too high for the current. Sheltered, simple, tranquil, it bridges the gap between two worlds. The place can be a feeling, a peaceful moment in time. This barrier defines our pond, but it blurs the definitions of water and land. (Pete Stiles)

Earlier Today  Neko was determined to get his first duck. His eyes glowered at the pond while he marched forward. Feathers flew and the gun boomed. Neko crowed when his victim plopped into the water. Sitting at the shore he awaited his prize. Mice scampered near and he stared them off. The ducks returned; one flew overhead but the trigger clicked into spent shells. The frogs were not to be stared off and his shoe got stuck stomping them. Neko marched away duckless with his muddy sock trailing flowered brambles. The fox smelled his passing and pooped out the mice’s last defiance. (Weldon Green)

What’s Wild?  The Skoglund pond area is supposedly natural, but what makes it so? The water, plants, and landscape have all been engineered, and most of the prairie fires have been planned, not left to natural chance. The bluebirds live in manufactured housing, and the path is groomed, summer and winter, for runners and skiers. The conifers are in neat rows, and the prairie grass species are in planned proportion. Even the lake level is rigged by biologists. Still, the place has wildness about it. The ducks come and go on their own schedules, and every frog croaks in its own secret key. (Paul Zorn)