

# My Solitudes

Three solitary places - in four seasons

A year of adventures in quiet enjoyment,  
in words and woodblock prints

David Bull

# My Solitudes

## Part One

### The River in Summer

'My Solitudes' is a collection of 12 woodblock prints, each paired with a chapter of this book, together illustrating and describing David's three 'private' nature retreats through the course of a full year.

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A number of years ago, before I became a father, I was an enthusiastic, if somewhat irregular, hiker and backpacker. Any number of times each year, either alone, or together with friends, I would take trips into the mountains that surrounded the Canadian city where I lived. Over the years, the enthusiasm waxed and waned as I passed through various stages of life, but it was a rare year during which I didn't make at least one overnight trip 'out there'.

Becoming a family man changed all that. It wasn't that I couldn't say to my family "I'm off to the mountains for a while. See you in a few days," it was that I just never *thought* of saying it. There was never any conscious decision that my backpacking days were over, it was simply that family and job filled my life completely.

Moving to Japan put even more distance between me and the outdoors. I went for the occasional walk into the hills (I can't call them 'mountains') near the town where I lived, but what I saw there stirred no desire in me to explore much further. The hand of man was everywhere; paths led this way and that, empty cans and cigarette packages littered the ground wherever one looked, and even the very trees themselves lined up in obedient neat rows, having been planted that way. It just didn't seem like nature. After the magnificent wildness of Canada that I was used to, the Japanese environment had no attraction for me at all.

The years went by. My work simplified; instead of the frantic mix of teaching English, making wooden toys, and re-writing translations that had made up my work in the first few years in Japan, I settled into a quiet routine of woodblock printmaking. And then, when my two daughters moved to Canada to continue their schooling over there, I found myself in a situation - for the first time in many years - where I actually had time to myself. And so my thoughts began to turn to the outdoors; was it now possible to enjoy some hiking again?

One idea that came up was to take a special trip back to Canada for a hiking holiday, but I put this aside; it wasn't a 'special' holiday that I wanted ... I simply wanted to start living again the way I once had, making frequent short trips out of the city

to find mental and physical refreshment in the open air. But where to go? Hiking on the scruffy and crowded trails I had seen here in Japan? No way ...

During the time that these thoughts were coming together in my mind, I fell into the habit of taking quite a long walk a couple of evenings each week. Starting from my home, I would walk for three or four hours, trying to avoid the noisiest and most built-up areas, and then with darkness falling, make my way to the nearest train station to return home. One of these walks took me along the Tama River, upstream from my home. The river passes through deep valleys before it comes out onto the Kanto plain, and I scrambled up and down trails that fishermen had made for access to their favourite casting spots. At one point I found myself looking around in some amazement. I knew I was actually not too far away from an urban area, but not only were there no visible traces of human presence, I couldn't *hear* anything either. The valley was so deep, the greenery so thick, and the river so spiritedly splashing along, that all sounds of civilization were muted or erased.

I sat on a rock by the side of the stream. It was hard to believe that such a place could exist so near my Tokyo home. What a wonderful place to relax! I wanted to stay longer, but it was getting late, the air was getting chilly, and I had to move on. A few minutes later, I was on a crowded train heading home.

After returning to my home and work, the vision of that peaceful riverbank wouldn't leave my mind. On my next walk a few days later, I returned to the same spot. I sat there again, entranced by the peacefulness of the place, and as I did, an idea came to me for an interesting way to get involved with backpacking again. Instead of trying to repeat the wilderness adventures that I had experienced in Canada years ago, try a different approach. Rather than long-distance hiking, try simply sitting still somewhere. Here. Bring a tent and some basic camping equipment, and stay for say, a 24-hour period, with no objective other than to sit quietly and learn what this place was like. Sit still, quietly absorbing the peaceful atmosphere and character of this spot, seeing something of the creatures that live here, and learning what 'happens' in the course of a day.

And then a real inspiration struck - come not just a single time, but return for a matching 24-hour period in each of the seasons; see how this place changes through the course of a year. I was seeing it now in early summer, but when the leaves turned colours and started to fall, I felt sure that I would get a completely different perspective. Then again in winter ... then in spring ...

I found the idea irresistible, and a few days later started my preparations. I found a huge outdoor shop near my home, one with a vast range of equipment for backpacking, and selected some simple gear: a small tent, a sleeping bag, and some basic cooking equipment.

It was while this preparation was underway that another inspiration came. I had no doubt that I would discover many interesting things during the days spent on the

riverbank, but why not broaden the scope to include some quite different environments? I could search out similar 'private' spots in other types of environment - in a mountain forest or on a beach on the seacoast. Surely the rhythm of the passing hours would be quite different in those places, and the passing seasons would bring quite marked changes.

If I were to take along a notebook and jot down some of the things that I saw, and some of the things that I felt ... might this not help me to 'see' the things around me just a bit better, and perhaps make interesting reading?

So that was the genesis of this 'My Solitudes' project. In addition to that riverbank near my home, I was indeed able to locate a peaceful forest grove and a quiet cove on the seacoast that fit my criteria - they are of course not 'wilderness'; but none of these places take more than a short journey to reach, they are completely insulated from the urban areas that surround them, and they provide a completely private 'nature' experience.

To each of these three spots I will return four times, roughly in line with the seasons. What will I see, and what will I find - boredom, or treasure? This book will be the record of my discoveries during the hours I spend in these quiet places. It is now mid-June, and soon the sunny summer weather will be here, the perfect season for starting this adventure. My preparations are nearly finished, and my private corner of the river awaits ...



# Part One

## The River in Summer

... somewhere on the Tama River ...

**I**t is less than five minutes walk from the station to that point on the road where the trail drops away on one side, leading down to the river. I'm sure that most people passing by never notice it at all; it must be used only by the local fishermen, and probably not very frequently even by them. The path is very steep, but thankfully short; so many years have passed since I've walked with a backpack that I'm a bit unsteady on my feet. But I soon arrive at the bottom, at the point where the trail breaks clear of the undergrowth and ends on a large craggy rock, overlooking this section of the river.

If I had been trying to design a good location for this first little adventure, I couldn't have done better. The valley is deep, and the sides are steep and heavily forested. To see open sky I must crane my neck back sharply. The river here is in places shallow enough to walk across, in other places deep and mysterious; alternately rough and gentle, headstrong and lazy, it flows past the green valley walls. The riverbank opposite is a wide strand of gravel, presumably piled up by the water in typhoon season, but the side where I stand is quite different - mostly large boulders and broken cliffs. Tucked away among this jumble of rock is a small patch of sand just big enough for my tent, providing a perfect camping spot. It is high enough above the water to avoid dampness, there are no old and shaky-looking trees hovering above and threatening to fall in the night, large boulders on each side protect it from the wind, and best of all, unless I have been disoriented by the curves of the river, I think that the morning sun will shine directly down onto a tent pitched here!

It doesn't take more than a few minutes to get the tent set up. I think I have chosen a good one for these little expeditions. It is a 2-3 man model, which is of course much larger than I need, but because I won't be doing any extended hiking with it, I selected for roominess rather than ease of carrying. Once it's up, I throw the rest of the gear inside, and walk over to the edge of the river to start an initial patrol of my new 'kingdom'. Now I know myself quite well, so during the time that I was planning these trips, I made some basic rules about how I would behave. I knew that it would be all too easy for me to get completely wrapped up in an exploration of this fasci-

nating place; climbing this rock, looking beyond that bend in the river, investigating that clump of trees over there ... I would find myself constantly on the move, seeing all that there was to see, consequently seeing nothing really, and of course, completely missing out on the peaceful solitude I was in search of. I had thought about making myself a '10-meter' rule: I was not to stray farther than that distance from the tent. No matter how interesting the next bend of the river looked, I was to stay put and see what this bend had to offer. It seemed a bit silly to be so regimented though, so I compromised with myself: I would make an initial exploration of the general area, in order to ensure that I wasn't overlooking any particularly interesting possibilities, and when that was done, would restrict myself to the immediate environment of my campsite.

Seen on a map, the Tama River in this area follows a pattern of straight stretches alternating with large sinuous loops, and my campsite is on one of those large bends. The river flows into view from off to my right, and is forced by a high steep cliff into a very sharp turn, almost doubling back on itself. It then slows and deepens into a round pool, in which the water rotates continuously in a wide vortex. A high stone crag guards the exit from this pool, and that portion of the water that wishes to escape from the 'trap' must squeeze past it. The flow is then straight for about 100 meters, shallow but rushing down a definite slope, a 'riffle' between wide gravel beds covered with tall grasses. Halfway along this stretch a small rivulet joins from the right. At the bottom of the slope the stream opens out into another deep and green pool, bordered by high, steep cliffs. It is forced by these to turn to the right and soon passes out of my sight.

I scramble over the rocks scattered along the bank, clamber to the top of the tall crag, and get a general overview of my home for the next day. It is now mid-afternoon, and if all goes according to plan, I will be here for a bit more than twenty-four hours, leaving tomorrow evening. The sky is mixed overcast, but at the moment the air is quite warm, and as I stand at the side of the round pool watching the water swirl endlessly in a circle, the invitation is too strong to resist. Off come my shirt and jeans, and in I go. The water is cold enough to make me shiver as I dive in, but not numbingly so. Down under the surface, I feel the tug of the gentle current carrying me around the pool. One circuit is enough for now, and I haul myself out onto a sloping rock facing the sun, the lower half of my body still under the surface. The warm sun ... the cool water ... the time stretching out before me ... I lie there, not thinking about much of anything at all, the water gently lapping at my waist. The swim has been a symbolic little ceremony. My adventure has begun ...

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Back at my campsite drying off, I receive my first visitors. Four two-legged creatures, two of them welcome ... two less so. The first two fly in from somewhere upstream, uttering only the faintest of gentle 'quacks' as they come gliding in for a splashdown at the foot of the riffle. Are they the same two brown ducks that I had noticed here on one of my exploratory walks a couple of weeks ago? I can well imagine one of them quacking to the other, "Here's that same guy again, and with a tent this time! I told you he'd be back, I could tell by the moony look on his face when he was here before ... I hope he won't be bothering us for too long ..." Well, they don't have too much to worry about. I'll be here only for a short time, and although I might invade their privacy a bit, eagerly spying on them as they go about their business, they have nothing to fear from me.

The next two visitors I feel less affinity for. Of course I knew when I chose a spot so close to an urban area that I could hardly expect complete solitude, but I had hoped that I wouldn't be 'bothered' too closely. Here they are though, two fishermen - chatty fishermen - on the gravel bank just across from my tent. They prepare their gear, and start casting into the riffle. One of them calls across to me, and glancing at the tent, asks if I will be staying here tonight. I don't want to be unfriendly, so nod to him, and ask if he is fishing for *ayu*. He shakes his head. "*Yamame*. This is the best spot on the whole river to find them. Just a while ago, somebody caught one right here about 30cm long." During my dip in the river, I had seen plenty of fish under there, but as the largest were only about 12 centimeters long, I rather doubt his story. I keep such thoughts to myself though, and a few minutes time later, they move a short distance away. For the entire time that they are in 'my' area, they are constantly in motion, casting into all corners of the river. I don't see them catch anything, but don't watch them for too long, because it has been clouding over, and now starts to drizzle. I retreat to my tent, eager to see how it will cope with its first test of the elements.

While checking the weather earlier in the morning, I had suspected that it might be rainy today, but hadn't let that hold me back. I recently met a man from Sweden who was here in Japan sightseeing, and while we were strolling around Tokyo together one afternoon, I looked anxiously at a cloudy sky, but he shrugged off my concerns. "There's no such thing as bad weather ... just inappropriate clothing!" was his comment. And he was right; there's no reason we should restrict our excursions to sunny days. If I were to see this river only in bright sunshine, it would give me a false understanding of what this environment is really like.

So I say 'eager' to see how my tent would cope, because I am quite sure that it will be completely impervious to a light rain shower like this. Sitting inside and listening to the patter of the droplets on the fabric stirs memories of those heavy canvas tents we had back in the Boy Scouts. It was no pleasure sitting in *them* when it rained! Each drop that struck the canvas sent a misty spray into the interior, and if we were

so foolish as to touch the fabric with a fingertip, water instantly started to drip from that spot, and would continue to do so all through the night! But tent technology has come a long way in the intervening years; the biggest change being the adoption of the tent + fly system. The tent itself is of delicate thin material, supported by lightweight flexible rods. Covering this, but not actually touching the tent fabric, is an outer 'skin' (the fly), a heavier, waterproof sheet that turns aside most of the rain. The air space between the tent and the fly acts both as an insulator and a ventilator, and the tent interior is thus kept cool under a hot sun, or warmer in cold weather.

While the rain shower continues I unpack my gear and get the space organized, laying out the mattress and sleeping bag, and sorting out the 'kitchen' tools and supplies. Everything is still brand new; I am so used to using old and battered stuff that it feels quite strange to be surrounded by such neat and clean equipment. I feel like I am in some kind of advertisement for a camping magazine! When everything is laid out to my satisfaction I lie on the bag listening to the rain fall. Completely comfortable and content, I don't regret at all my choice of today for this first trip.

I soon rediscover something that I learned many years ago, but had forgotten; that a simple tent like this one, made of just a few scraps of thin fabric, can produce a remarkable transformation in one's environment. Inside this shelter I become a blind man; it is my ears that are now my dominant sense. The fabric blocks all sight of what is around me, while the sounds - the breeze in the trees and the raindrops falling - come to me unimpeded by the tent walls. Our eyes are such a dominant sense organ that most of the time, input from our other senses is almost totally ignored, merely providing a background accompaniment to the all-important vision. During my time in this valley so far today I have looked around me ceaselessly, my eyes never still, taking note of this object and that, this action and that, but now, blinded by the thin nylon, I notice things to which I was insensate just a moment ago. What had been a single 'noise' - the rippling sound of the river tumbling past my campsite - has become a medley played by a collection of individual 'instruments'. In one spot 'here' I can hear the sound where the water must be splashing up against a large stone, over 'there' is some kind of gurgle where the river is swirling past an obstruction; in yet another place is a kind of hissing where the water is probably running over a shallow stony place. There are many more voices than I can identify. It's like being in a large room full of people at a party; at first you can hear only the overall noise of them all chatting to each other, but if you close your eyes (must you close your eyes?) you can tune in to individual conversations ... It gives me a glimpse into the rich world of sonic sensation in which blind people must live. I wonder if there is any way that we can develop such sophisticated hearing ability without having to lose our sight first. Are our eyes always to remain so dominant?

As I ponder this, I become aware that the sound of the drops pattering on the tent is changing, and a short time later, the rain tapers off. I scramble out of the tent and

immediately feel the coolness in the air that follows such a shower. That short rainfall has washed away the warmth that had been radiating from all the large stones, and a minute later I'm in long-sleeve shirt and jeans. Evening is on the way.

I hadn't paid much attention to them earlier, but now become aware of the many small birds flitting back and forth all around me. Perhaps they have become more active now that the hottest part of the day is past, or perhaps it is that more insects are coming 'out to play', offering the birds a smorgasbord of varied tastes to sample. There are quite a number of different birds here; some with yellow feathers, some blue; some extremely tiny, some larger. I don't have the slightest idea what their names are. I had thought about bringing a bird book to help me identify them, but decided against it. It would be all too easy to bury my nose in a book and miss the real scene around me, and even if I did succeed in identifying and classifying these birds, it would mean nothing. I would just have a 'label' for each one - "That's a 'red-tipped flicky' ... there's a 'short-shafted wag wing' ... Look over there, that's a rare 'white-banded oreo' ..."

Is it too 'simple' to admit that I am content just watching these birds fly about on their business? I don't want any part of studying or analyzing them. Some of you reading this would perhaps find it interesting to know which particular species I see here down by the river, but to seek out that information would spoil my 'mission'. I'm not trying to denigrate the acquisition of knowledge, and I'm sure that the ability to identify these creatures provides quite some satisfaction to those who possess it, but those of us who can say only "Look at that!" when we watch one of these acrobats swoop across the sky are no less thrilled ...

To these birds, I am just another animal sharing their space this evening. That they are keeping an eye on me I am sure, just as I am watching them. They care nothing for classifying me ... "There's one of those 'blue-legged backpackers'. That's the first one we've seen this season ..." Curiously enough, it is just as I am thinking this that I become aware that they have all suddenly disappeared. I can still hear their chirping from all about me, but none of them are flying out in the open. I twist my head to look around ... then peer upwards. And there, sailing down the valley on a level with the tree tops up on the rim, is some kind of large hawk-like bird. His wings are spread wide, and the feathers on each wing-tip stick out like long fingers, turning and twisting, gently controlling his glide along the air currents. His head hangs downwards and he looks this way and that as he floats by, watching I presume, for something edible and catchable to come into sight. But why have the smaller birds all scooted out of sight? Is he hunting them? I feel it hard to imagine that he would, or could, chase them. Surely he is watching for fish in the shallows ... or mice in the undergrowth. There seems to be no question about it though, as he has no sooner passed out of sight around the bend to my right when they are all back in flight again, busily helping themselves to more dinner.

And my thoughts too, turn to food. Surely it must be getting on a bit ... Should I get the stove out and start cooking? What time is it anyway? I have no wrist-watch with me; I never use one during my days back in the city, rarely having any appointments to get to. I would be misleading you though, if I left the impression that I never care what time it is. While busy in my workshop each day I usually listen to the radio, and refer frequently to the clock that is built into my stereo system, to ensure that I catch whatever program I have in mind to listen to. During those working days, I invariably break for lunch or dinner 'by the clock'. But now here I am, with neither watch nor radio. It should be simple enough, shouldn't it, to tell if it is dinnertime - am I hungry, or not? I have to admit that I can't really tell! It seems that having spent years on end with my daily meal routine being clock-driven rather than hunger-driven, now that I have no timepiece on hand, I am actually unable to tell if I am hungry!

It seems to me that the only possible answer to this question has to be - no, it isn't dinner time. If I don't clearly feel hungry, then of course it can't yet be time to eat. Forget about dinner for a while; my stomach will no doubt let me know when the right moment arrives. Yet there is no denying that I feel somewhat uncomfortable not knowing what time it is; vaguely adrift and a bit restless ...

As I mull over these things, I notice another change in the behaviour of the creatures around me. Just near the rock where I sit, out over the surface of the water, a quite large cloud of insects has formed. The cloud is in constant motion, a roiling whirlwind of tiny black bodies, jerking madly every which way. I suppose that just by being here, I am protecting them from the birds that sweep through other clouds to pluck members from the air, but I'm sure they can't be conscious of such things. I am curious about why they dance like this. I think I know what that hawk was doing as he sailed down the valley ... I'm sure I know what all those other birds around me are doing ... but what are these insects doing, dancing in such a madcap way? Perhaps they also are having dinner - feeding on some unseen to me even smaller level of insects.

Whatever it is that they are doing, it does make a beautiful sight, and their frantic activity certainly makes me look like a paragon of calm restfulness - at least my exterior aspect. I think though, that if the thoughts inside my head could be somehow made visible, this is what they might look like. Buzzing and buzzing around and around, rarely still ... I'd prefer not to think about that too much at the moment ... Hmm ... maybe I *am* hungry, after all. Time to get started on dinner!

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My tent isn't the only thing that has dramatically changed since Boy Scout days. Back then we did all our cooking on open fires (when we could get them started, that is!) but during my visit here I will make no campfire. There's almost no fire hazard - being right next to the water - but I have a real distaste for leaving behind the black mess that even the smallest fire would create on this little beach, even though the next big rainstorm would probably wash away whatever traces I might leave. I shudder with embarrassment now to recall how we behaved back in the 'good old days'; our troop of neophyte woodsmen moving into each new campsite with axes, hatchets and shovels in hand. We chopped and hacked away at everything in sight, building tables, benches, fire pits ... It must have taken the woods years to recover from each of our onslaughts. I doubt that the Boy Scouts still do it that way; I am sure that by now they have acquired a more responsible ethic. As I grew up, I too learned to treat the outdoors with more respect, and am now a devotee of the 'take only pictures, leave only footprints' school. When I leave this spot tomorrow evening, only a few flattened weeds will show where I lived for a day, and they will spring back very quickly. No, no campfire.

Yet I certainly don't intend to have a cold dinner! Out of a pocket in my backpack comes a small case, 12 x 12 x 8 cm in size - my new stove. A small drawstring sack contains two cooking pots with a gas canister tucked inside. The long side pockets of the backpack each hold a 1.5 litre container of fresh water, and from another small sack come two small and lightweight foil packages - tonight's curry rice dinner. With the gas canister connected, the stove flames brightly at the click of the starter button, and a few minutes later steam is starting to rise from the water in the pot. As it comes to a boil, I dump the package of freeze-dried rice in, stir it for about five minutes and then take it off to soak up the moisture and cook. While the rice is steaming, I repeat the process with the curry mixture in a second pot. It looks remarkably unappetizing as it comes from the package, but five minutes later, after being gently heated and reconstituted, it both looks and smells wonderful. The curry goes over top of the now perfectly done rice, and dinner is served. The preparation took less than ten minutes start to finish, and would the Boy Scouts believe it, it wasn't even necessary to use any matches. Clean and simple ...

The light is starting to fade rapidly now, so perhaps I actually guessed dinnertime correctly after all! I sit on a small ground sheet, my back against a smooth sloping boulder, and enjoy my meal, taking slow spoonfuls of the hot curry. Whether or not it is my memory playing games I can't tell, but this food seems to taste quite a bit better than the freeze-dried stuff I used to eat on camping trips back in Canada. I don't think that this Japanese-made food is any better *per se*, but more likely that food processing technology has made advances over the last decade or so. It's an interesting contrast to my typical meals at home - there the preparation usually takes longer than the eating, but here this evening it is the other way round. I'm looking forward

to seeing what else will be on the menu during these trips ...

I was indeed hungry, and there certainly isn't anything left behind in the pots as I clean them out with a swish of gravel and river water. The now-cool stove goes back into its case, and the pots back into their bag, but the gas cartridge has a bit more work to do this evening. Although I won't make a campfire, I have no intention of forgoing the pleasures of sitting out on the river bank in the quiet evening. But on an overcast night with no moon or stars ...? No problem. A second small case comes out of the backpack, slightly smaller than the one that contained the stove. The case contains a lantern attachment for the cartridge, and a moment later it is casting a warm glow across the scene. Unlike the lanterns we carried many years ago, this one doesn't produce a loud roar, and I can still clearly hear the sound of the rippling river. I set the lantern on the ground some distance away from me, in case it attracts a horde of insects, but am somewhat surprised to find that it doesn't. Perhaps the season is yet too young ... I have yet to see a single mosquito ...

And as for those pleasures I mentioned? What do I see this evening? What do I do? What is there to report in these pages? Nothing, nothing, and everything. I see nothing at all; nothing but the black shape of the tall trees on the opposite cliff top outlined against the slightly less black sky. I do nothing at all; nothing but sit quietly and listen to the water endlessly flowing by. But if I really knew how to write properly, what I could tell you of this evening!

When I had been talking to my daughter, telling her of my plans for this trip, she had asked "What about night-time? Won't you be scared?" I had difficulty explaining to her what it feels like to relax in the evening in a campsite. To be outside like this, but to know that I don't have to get moving ... I don't have to head for home. There in the soft lantern light is my comfortable tent, in which soft mattress and deep warm sleeping bag are waiting for me. Clustered behind it, barely visible at the edge of the pool of light, are the tall and dark shadows of the nearby trees, not menacing, but protective ... And of course, there is the river; flowing steadily by, even in the darkness. All night long, the rippling and gentle splashing - that orchestra of voices to which I was introduced during the afternoon's rainfall - will provide a background to my sleep, a sonic pillow for my reveries.

Just to sit there in that serenity, with no thought of moving on, no thought of what's next ... what's next ... what's coming next ... The sights and events that tomorrow will bring are as yet of no concern. My trip is turning out to be a wonderful success. Soon the yawns become just too frequent. I douse the lantern, use a tiny flashlight to find my bed ... and have no further memories of this most pleasant of days ...

**G**iven my new status as a 'blind' man whenever inside my tent, I am sure that you can easily guess how the morning would greet me, here on this river bank. Yes of course ... the birds ... Yesterday I watched them fly this way and that, feeding as they went, and now as I rise into consciousness in my warm sleeping bag, they provide the opening to the day's 'drama'. And what an overture! They are downright noisy! It's a good thing I was in bed early last night, because if I had stayed up late, with the intention of sleeping in lazily this morning, I would perhaps not feel quite so benevolent towards this noisy mob swarming all around me ...

Peeking out through the tent flap, I see that the sky is light. It looks like a greyish overcast day, with no chance for the sun to poke through into my tent as I had planned. But the sky isn't particularly heavy-looking, and although there is a chill in the air, it doesn't bite. Last night before sleep I had toyed with the idea of taking an early morning swim when I awoke, but somehow that idea doesn't seem quite as attractive now as it had then ... In any case, there's no sense lying here doing nothing - time to get up and do nothing!

Breakfast is just as much pleasure as dinner was last night. The preparation is much the same: water heated to boiling first, then the ingredients mixed in. This time it's not freeze-dried camping food, but something I purchased from an import food store at which I frequently shop - packages of instant oatmeal. Together with some cinnamon and a handful of raisins, this provides just the right warm heaviness in my stomach to fend off the morning chill. I sit on what has become my 'dining table' boulder by the water's edge, in a warm sweater, eating slowly, and watch two ducks paddling upstream towards me. They look like the same birds that I watched yesterday. Are they a 'couple'? I thought that male and female bird pairs were usually differently coloured, with the male being the more brightly decorated, but these two seem to be the same colour. They don't come near me, but stay along the opposite bank, and as they come upstream against the current they are constantly dipping their heads under the surface to look for whatever it is that they would rather have for breakfast than hot oatmeal. As they reach the spot just across from me where that rivulet joins the stream, one of them splashes into the shallows and starts foraging in that arm of the river. A moment later, the other follows. They certainly do seem to be a couple ...

I wonder ... just why it is that they stay together. Every time I have seen them now, first on my walks a few weeks ago, then yesterday afternoon, flying back and

forth, they have been together. It seems quite easy to understand why two humans would form a pair; we say words like “Will you marry me ...” , and a decision is made consciously to do things together ‘from now on’. And I can just as readily understand how two animals can come together for mating, as that seems just a question of following the dictates of their hormones. But birds like this seem to be staying together at times when mating is not taking place. I find it difficult to believe that they actually see themselves as a couple, that each of them feels more secure with the other nearby, that they love each other. Are their little ducky brains really complex enough to register such feelings? You may be laughing at my question, but doesn’t this start to make you wonder about us humans? I like to think of myself as a fairly intelligent creature, and feel that my preference for being together with a certain person is something dictated cerebrally, and not purely by raw instincts. Of course, humans respond to hormones too, and we accept their role in sexual attraction, but the main reason I like being with my partner hour after hour and day after day is the pleasure of her company - the conversation, the exchange of ideas, the assistance we give each other with our projects ... But if two ‘brainless’ ducks can form the same sort of bond together, then I must be fooling myself. Perhaps my ‘mind’ really has nothing to do with it.

I think it’s a bit too early in the morning yet for such complicated thoughts, so I let the happy couple float out of sight without further interference. I find that I’m still yawning as I spoon in my cereal. What time is it, I wonder - 7:30? 8:00? There’s just no way to tell ... And then, splashing into sight from around the bend at the right, comes the first fisherman of the morning. He stations himself in exactly the same spot used by the men yesterday. I’m beginning to realize that if it was absolute privacy that I sought down here on this river, I certainly chose the wrong location. He doesn’t talk to me though, and perhaps also wishes to keep to himself. After preparing his gear, he makes an initial cast into the stream, and immediately hooks a fish. He raises his rod to pull it from the water, and as it swings through the air towards him, it wriggles wildly, throwing water droplets in every direction. It’s not very large, perhaps six or eight centimeters. What happens next shocks me. Tucking the end of the rod under one arm, he grasps the line in one hand, the fish in the other, pulls it straight off the hook, and throws it aside onto the gravel. From a pouch in his clothing he draws some supplies, rebaits his hook, and casts again. A minute later, he catches another one, and the same sequence of events follows, again throwing the fish onto the ground. And then again, and then again. By the time he decides to move further down the river and out of my sight, there must be nearly a dozen dead fish lying scattered on the ground.

What was he looking for, larger fish? A different species? If this is typical fishermen’s behaviour, then there soon won’t be any fish left in this river at all. I try and put it out of my mind, determined not to let it spoil my day, and return to my tent

to clean up my breakfast things. That only takes a moment, and then I get out my notebook and pencil, and settle down to make a few notes about some of the things I have seen. There's no shortage of places to sit; many of the boulders surrounding my campsite have been water-worn into complex curved shapes, all asking to be tried out as chairs and sofas. I simply wander about, as though I was in some kind of modern furniture shop, until I find one that looks comfortable.

The sky is unchanged, still a smooth light grey colour, but there is a shift in the air movement. When I awoke, I had felt a very faint movement of air downstream, but this now changes to a stronger current in the opposite direction, more of a breeze. It's still quite cool, and I feel no inclination at all to remove my sweater. This is supposed to be a summer story ... Perhaps I should have paid more attention to the weather forecast.

I scribble a bit, yawn a bit, and scribble some more. I sit and survey the scene, watching the birds fly back and forth, and wonder if I've now met most of the main actors in the cast of this play, if I have seen most of the 'action'. I have no way of knowing, but am quite content to remain in my seat in this theatre, and see what is yet to develop ... Is it nearly lunch time yet?

...

The rock on which I sit drops steeply off into the water on my left side, and from where I sit, I can see right down into the deep pool that the river forms there. From this angle, there is no reflection of the sky to block my view into the water, and I can see almost to the bottom. There are any number of fish hanging there in the water, almost motionless. Does that fisherman know that there are so many over here? There's no way that I'm going to tell him! And then, as I watch the fish, I become aware that the light is changing; the water seems brighter, the fish are casting shadows on the nearby rocks. I look up, expecting to see a break in the clouds overhead with a shaft of sunshine peeking through, and am stunned to find that there are no clouds. The sky is clear, but changing from that plain grey colour to a delicate blue. The sun is not overhead, but creeping up from behind the gap in the opposite cliffs where I had expected it to show this morning. It's sunrise! Here I am starting to think about lunch, and it must actually be around 5:00 in the morning! What I had originally thought to be a grey overcast sky was simply the colourless sky of the pre-dawn hours. It's going to be a beautiful day; a beautiful summer day!

Almost immediately it begins to feel warmer, and I take off my sweater gratefully. Looking back towards the tent I am reminded just what a perfect campsite this is. The sun is shining directly into the interior, where it will soon erase any remaining traces of the night's dampness. This nearly horizontal light seems to favour the lighter shades of green in the woods and grassy areas, and the world looks much brighter and

fresher than it will at mid-day.

I notice some kind of ungainly insect fluttering haphazardly in my general direction. A sudden change in the breeze flings him up and deposits him right in my lap. I reach out to try and pick him up, but with a frantic flap of his wings, he bangs against my chest, and is gone. Down and down ... plop onto the surface of the pool. He looks to be damaged somehow, madly fluttering in circles on the water like teenagers driving a supercharged motorboat. He seems to be stuck to the surface. This way and that he struggles violently, while the general motion of the water slowly draws him towards the deep place where those dozens of fish hover in the sunshine. I might get a chance to see a minor drama here; 'Jaws' rising up from the deep to snatch his prey! Still frantically fluttering, the bug enters the danger zone. The fish don't seem to notice. None of them move. A moment later, the current and breeze have brought him to the bank, and he scrambles free of the water's grip, and scurries up into the brush ... lost to sight ... Safe.

Why didn't one of the fish come up and grab him? Out in the main current there are numerous splashes and ripples showing that the fish out there are feeding. Have these 'lazy' ones already eaten their fill and come here to relax in this still water in the sunshine? Maybe fish only eat out there where the water is in motion, and that is why the fishermen don't come to this corner to try their luck. Watching more carefully, I see that there is quite a crowd of little insects skating on the surface of the water here. None of them are disturbed at all by the fish. I see that I have a lot to learn about fish feeding habits. It's a good thing I didn't plan on catching my own meals here!

A flash of bright white catches my eye - a new type of bird making its way into my world. The labels 'heron' and 'egret' come to mind. Wide, lazily flapping wings keep him up, and two ridiculously thin and long legs dangle below. To my disappointment, he decides not to come in for a landing; maintaining his altitude, he continues upstream, around the bend, and out of sight. I wonder to what extent my presence is affecting the behaviour of these creatures. They are certainly familiar with humans. I have to keep reminding myself that even though I can see and hear nothing of it, this spot is in the centre of a large city. Two minutes up the pathway would bring me to a residential community, and another two minutes to the train station. Presumably, any birds or animals that were notably shy of humans wouldn't be living in this place. I imagine though, that they've learned not to come too close ...

I sit back and watch the river go by. It's a bit like being in a room where the television is on. Even if you are talking with somebody, the unceasing motion in that spot keeps drawing your eyes back. The river does the same thing. Just a few yards behind me is a thickly forested hillside, in which I am sure there are many interesting things to be discovered, but my attention is constantly distracted by the movement of the water. It's never still for an instant, in constant motion, yet it never changes. The wa-

ter flows by, from right to left as I sit here, but the 'waves', those bumps in the surface that show the position of rocks just beneath, never change position, just shimmer and vibrate endlessly. I think that the water in ocean waves doesn't actually move, being just lifted up and down as the wave energy passes by, but here it seems to be the other way round. The water is moving by steadily, but the waves stand still ... Although my decision not to have a campfire in the evenings has cost me the pleasure of gazing into the flickering flames, the fascinating movement of this water more than compensates for it ...

I wonder how much of a variation in water level there is from day to day. On the side of that large crag upstream there is a kind of water line on the rock, about a metre above the current water level, below which there is no substantial vegetation. I suppose this shows the height to which the water rises after heavy rains or typhoons. All these gravel bars have obviously been formed by the flow of the river, and some of them are quite solid and extensive. This river may have quite a different appearance when I return in another season.

That there could be such a vigorous full river at this place was something of a surprise to me when I first saw it. The Tama as it flows through the urban areas downstream from here is a sickly and feeble stream, across which one can walk in many places almost without getting one's feet wet. So moving upstream to this place, as a matter of course I expected that the flow would be even smaller. I had forgotten though, that a great deal of the water is sucked out of it for part of Tokyo's mains supply, and it is even further drained by the *Tamagawa Josui* canal. Coming upstream has brought me to a point before these depletions take place, and here it flows full-bodied and unobstructed. I don't suppose that too many of the people living down there realize what has happened to 'their' river.

The sun slowly climbs higher, and the rocks start to radiate warmth. Back on another boulder, I sit a bit, daydream a bit ... I stare into the water, gaze up into the forest ... Although my description may sound quite mindless, there isn't the slightest feeling of boredom. Although I doubt that any physical changes have taken place in my body, I can definitely feel that the pace of my thinking, of my mental activity, has slowed down. When back in my home in the city, I find it nearly impossible to sit still and do nothing. When one activity is finished, I automatically find myself starting another; if there is nothing waiting at the moment, I reach for a book or newspaper, or I get up and start hunting for something to do. Out here though, I feel no such impulses. Just sitting is enough. The hours pass by ...

...

The sun has now climbed high into the sky (surely it must be getting near lunch-time ...!), and the hillside on the opposite bank has been thrown into deep shadow. Against this dark backdrop, I can see many tiny points of light; insects hovering in the warm air above the gravel bar, catching the sunlight coming from above as they dance about. Perhaps the birds too can see easily, for there seems to be a feast going on. Every minute or so, a bird launches itself upwards towards one of the dancing points. Surprisingly, it doesn't strike directly, but climbs gradually upwards in an ever-rising series of swoops. It looks rather like a small aircraft, climbing perhaps too steeply, falling into a shallow dive, then swooping upwards again, a bit higher each time. Finally it gets enough altitude and ... 'chomp', the point of light disappears, the bird switches to 'dive bomber' mode, dropping straight back down into the undergrowth, and I await the next to take a turn.

It is very much warmer now, and I am starting to sweat here under the sun. The stones underfoot are hot to the touch; the deep green of the pool off to my left beckons; it's time for that swim I postponed this morning. I have brought a face mask with me, and now dig it out of my bag, strip to my briefs, and slide under the surface of the pool. The jagged and craggy rock faces surrounding my campsite are interspersed with a lighter and smoother type of stone, greatly water worn. Once underwater these all appear fantastic and mysterious. I swim along with the sunlight beaming down through the water all around me, and watch my shadow explore in my stead all those dark crevices among the rocks where I dare not go myself.

There are a *lot* of fish down here. None of them are willing to let me approach too closely, so whichever way I turn I am faced with the sight of their fleeing tails. Off to one side I notice a sudden movement down near the bottom, and turn my head just in time to see, heading out of sight down into the deeper water under the cliff, a long and dark fishy shape. About 30cm long I think, although it's very difficult to judge sizes down here. So what that fisherman said yesterday was true! There *are* huge fish under here. I try and follow him, but have to surface for breath, and when I duck down again, he is lost to view. It seems incredible that such a fish has been able to grow so large here, with all those fishermen trying day after day to lure him out. He must be eating a lot, in order to have grown to that size, but has apparently learned to tell the difference between safe food and their lures. Can fish be really that intelligent? It hardly seems possible, but there he is ... I wish him the best of luck, and turn away to leave him in peace.

I float out into the main current and am gently swept downstream. When I've gone far enough, I pull back towards the shore and find that the current there is moving in the reverse direction, and carries me 'home'. Round and round I go, swept this way and that like a leaf on the stream. Eventually I pull myself from the water, pat myself dry, and after a pleasant lunch of tea and some muffins extracted from another pouch in my pack, am soon asleep on the mattress in my tent. For ten minutes? An

hour? I haven't the slightest idea. The endless day lazes on ...

When I wake up, it's still very hot, so I slide directly back into the water. This time though, as there haven't been any other visitors since that fisherman before sunrise this morning, I don't bother with any clothes ... It seems completely ridiculous to be putting clothing on to enter the water. It is so much more pleasant to swim this way than with even the briefest swimsuit on. There seems something elemental about sliding along under the water naked. Perhaps too, the relative rarity of the experience makes it feel special. But what a strange and clumsy white fish I must seem to those fish to whom this pool is home. White ... but rapidly turning red under today's hot and bright sun. When I've had enough swimming, I put my shorts back on, along with a T-shirt to protect my shoulders from further damage, and find a smooth rock against which to lean.

I have just settled back comfortably when another astonishing resident of this district steps forward to present itself. I feel a small insect landing on my leg, and recognizing that gangly-legged shape ... the striped pattern ... I reach out to crush the pesky mosquito instantly. But just at the last instant, my eye catches something that tells my hand to stop, and instead of smashing it out of existence, I gently coax it to hop onto a finger. It's not a mosquito, but a tiny, perfectly-formed mosquito-sized praying mantis. There are plenty of these fascinating insects in the bushes and flowers around my home, but never before have I seen one this small. It looks exactly like the larger version; the same bent forelimbs, the spindly legs, that triangular head ridiculously stuck onto the stick-like body. Whether this is a juvenile, or a fully-grown adult of some tiny species, I haven't a clue. We sit there, the two of us looking at each other. What thoughts are going around at this moment in that tiny brain, no bigger than a grain of sand? Is he thinking? Is he thinking about me? We look steadily at each other, his minuscule head occasionally cocking sideways this way and that, and we play the 'who will break out laughing first' game. It's just too ridiculous; I can't avoid laughing out loud at the thought, and he wins. I gently brush him off my hand onto some nearby plants where I hope he will be safe from my feet when I get up ... Perhaps I can meet him again when I come back later in the year.

Returning to my tent, I find that the sun has moved far enough across the sky to throw it into the shade, and it is now the far bank that lies bathed in the sunlight. The shadows are lengthening ... For the first time in this long peaceful day, I must think about leaving this place, and heading home. Think about heading back to my 'real' home, not this little nylon and elastic one.

But I'm reluctant to start packing just yet. Who knows what further adventures will present themselves? And no sooner has that thought come, when yes, one does ... The hawk I met yesterday afternoon (*can* I call him a hawk?), has been with me all day

today, coming and going upstream and down. He sometimes circles high above the trees, and sometimes perches on a tall dead tree across the river from my tent, watching all that happens below. I've been watching him too, to try and see just what it is that he's trying to catch. Mice? Small birds? Fish in the river? And now I find out.

He now circles much lower than before, coming lower and lower towards a shallow ripple just a short distance down the river. At the last possible moment before impact his feet extend like an aircraft landing gear, and he snatches a fish from the water. It's not very big, about as long as one of my fingers. As he flaps in wide circles gaining altitude again, I see him reach down with his beak and strike the wriggling silvery shape. The fish becomes still. He reaches down again, still flapping steadily, and tosses his head back ... I see a flash of silver and then nothing. The fish is gone. A moment ago, a peaceful fish with a normal fishy future in front of it, and now dead meat in a bird's gullet, high in the sky. All in just a few seconds. Yet this is not the end of the show.

Ten minutes goes by ... I am in my tent, notebook in front of me, jotting down a few memos for this little story ... 'hawk spiralling down ...' 'silvery fish ...' A movement outside catches my eye. He's back, making another plunge, this time right in front of my tent, just a few metres from me. It's the same script, although this time the fish is larger, and I can see it very clearly. It thrashes about wildly ... but only until the terrible beak again makes that sudden thrust. A moment later, this fish too is gone. Was this the hawk's special goodbye present to me? Or was it just that he felt able to come this close because I was hidden from view? If I had stayed sequestered in this tent all day, the various creatures living here at this place in the river would perhaps have come closer. But I certainly can't complain. They have given me a great show. It's been an unforgettable and very satisfying day; this summer day on the river. It is hard to contain my anticipation for the coming autumn, winter, and spring visits, when once again I will set up my little tent on this sandy spot. Whether I 'just' see the same things again, or new dramas unfold before my eyes, will make no difference.

But that's still in the future. For now, the chilly breeze is strengthening steadily, the sun has dipped below the mountains behind me, and I can no longer put off starting to gather my things together. It is but a few minutes work to fold up the tent, stow everything into the backpack, and clean up the campsite. Before I tramp through the bushes that guard the entrance to the trail, I turn back to look once more. Nothing left but a few footprints. The river flows on as if nothing had happened, as if nobody had been here. A man came here, sat for 24 hours, then got up and left. He made no more impact on this place than that white bird which flew down the river and silently disappeared around the bend; leaving no trace, changing nothing. The water just keeps flowing by ceaselessly and unchanging.

I head up the trail into the woods ... to the station ... and home. Yes, a most satisfying day ...

*“If I had been trying to design a good location for this first little adventure, I couldn’t have done better. The valley is deep, and the sides are steep and heavily forested. To see open sky I must crane my neck back sharply. The river here is in places shallow enough to walk across, in other places deep and mysterious; alternately rough and gentle, headstrong and lazy, it flows past the green valley walls. The riverbank opposite is a wide strand of gravel, presumably piled up by the water in typhoon season, but the side where I stand is quite different - mostly large boulders and broken cliffs. Tucked away among this jumble of rock is a small patch of sand just big enough for my tent, providing a perfect camping spot. It is high enough above the water to avoid dampness, there are no old and shaky-looking trees hovering above and threatening to fall in the night, large boulders on each side protect it from the wind, and best of all, unless I have been disoriented by the curves of the river, I think that the morning sun will shine directly down onto a tent pitched here.”*

## The River in Summer

Designed, carved and printed by David Bull, May-June 2007

Blocks: Japanese mountain cherry (17 faces)

Impressions: 31

Paper: *Echizen Hosho* from the workshop of Mr. Ichibei Iwano

