



Bully for Boxelder, or The Plentitude of Plain

*A Green Hearts essay by Ken Finch
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It's a second-class tree, so say the arbor-culturists. Boxelder (*Acer negundo*) is the outcast of the maple family. Its leaves look nothing like other maples, its wood is weak with no commercial value, it is considered "weedy" in its growth patterns, and its sap is low in sugar content and thus hard to boil into syrup. Plus it nurtures boxelder bugs: those harmless black and orange bugs that make a nuisance of themselves by invading homes in mass during the fall. Without a doubt, boxelder is the ugly duckling of maples.

Yet, in fairness, it is fast-growing for a tree, re-produces easily from its winged seeds ("samaras"), and tolerates both drought and cold. Consequently, boxelders are a significant part of the landscape in much of the country — even if they are unheralded and largely unrecognized. The multitude of birds that use them for nesting and roosting presumably don't consider them trashy, nor do the various insects and small mammals that live on, in, or off the trees and their seeds. In the eye of the beholder, perhaps....

I have boxelder trees in my backyard viewscape, along with a different Boxelder: the small creek that flows through that same scene. Like its namesake, the creek is unlovely and under-appreciated. Years of erosion have cut it deeply into the earth, where any accumulated trash becomes very hard to remove. It sometimes flows fast and free, but it's always muddy. There are a few places where you can sit peacefully on a fallen log and dangle your toes in the water, but only if you can manage to safely scramble your way down the steep, often-slippery banks.

But last week Boxelder Creek took a giant leap up in my estimation, for one simple reason: I heard children's laughter coming from it. There were orioles, chickadees, and goldfinches calling; a brisk wind was whispering in the leaves; and I knew that the neighborhood red foxes live somewhere down in the gully. Yet the quality that resonated with me — that actually made me smile — was the sound of unseen nature play wafting up from the streambed.

Kids have played in creeks for as long as there have been kids. Racing pool sticks, catching crawdads and frogs, dropping large rocks in with a big kerplunk, turning over stones to see what lives beneath, and just kicking their way up the shallow water — these

are the joyful essence of creek play! And in quieter moments, stream-side might be the setting for a little private chat with a best buddy, or a place to just be alone for awhile and ponder the world — something children have always needed time for, but get so little of in today's digitally paced world.

Probably only a few of the neighborhood kids have ever discovered the delights of playing in Boxelder Creek, given the protected and controlled nature of modern suburban childhoods. I doubt if any of them know the creek's name. And most of those creek-players likely take little notice of the orioles, or the fox den, or even the living LEDs of the early fireflies that are just starting to get on with their warm-weather mating rituals.

On the other hand, I guarantee that no creek-playing kid has ever fretted about the soft wood and weedy growth of a boxelder tree! Much more likely: they grab handfuls of those samaras and send them helicoptering into the air; they catch/mash/finger flick the boxelder bugs; and they climb triumphantly into the canopy like it's their own Everest. Plus, that sunken creek setting is uniquely theirs, affording the special sense of ownership that arises in children's private domains — i.e., places where no grown-ups go. The trees and the creek may be comely, plain, and routine to adult eyes, but to off-the-leash, adventuresome kids they represent play a-plenty!

With a few thousand dollars, the creek-players' parents can drive up the road and buy an elaborate and impressive backyard playset for their children. But the self-discovered fun, challenge, magic, and quietude of playing in plain old Boxelder Creek, under weedy boxelder trees?

Priceless.