The Upland Pasture

On barren upland pastures of Maine's coastal islands worn thin like threadbare carpets, an assortment of specially adapted plants covers the ground. The sterile fields have been long abandoned for the pasturing of cows and sheep. Prostrate junipers edge the rocky slopes, waiting to move in. Prickly to bare ankles, the junipers thrive in these sun-flooded fields; they will eventually fill the fields, crowding out all the smaller plants, until the invading forest overshadows them and they too die from lack of light.

Observed casually, an upland pasture seems sparsely inhabited, with a mat of growth and no tall plants or grasses. Enter on a dewy morning ~~though~~, and your feet will be wet in three steps. Hardly noticed until their burden of shining droplets chills and wets your feet, the old stalks and spears of grass grow close together. They grow like the first stubble beard of an adolescent boy, but they come from old age. As these stalks dry in the morning sun, they vanish into the confused background of matted vegetation.

The vegetative cover is dominated by one primitive and two flowering plants. Their patchwork of colors and shapes solidly occupies the ground, but the species intermingle at their borders. The primitive plant is a bluish, gray-green, branching moss-like lichen commonly called reindeer moss. A lichen is a working or symbiotic arrangement between a single-celled alga and a fungus for which the concept of discrete individuals (as with trees or flowering plants) is meaningless. Reindeer moss often covers a large area with a continuous gray growth, brittle and crackly in dry weather and spongy after a rain.

The flowering plants that do best in barren Maine fields are blueberries and hawkweed. The blueberry bushes grow in low tangled shrubs with densely arrayed, small lanceolate leaves. In late May or early June, the pink, panicled, bell-shaped flowers start to show. When the bells drop off, they leave behind tiny hard green berries which swell as they change to pink and, in July, to a powdery blue, turgid fruit. Each berry is crowned with a ring of sepals marking where the flower was originally attached. When you rub off the powdery bloom, the underlying skin is a dark navy blue, containing all the dye of the berry whose pulp is almost colorless.

Hawkweed crowds out grass by different tactics, spreading its runners over the ground. At intervals along the runners narrow leaves grow into a mat of overlapping rosettes bristly with white hairs. From the center of each whorl of leaves in June appears a hairy stalk which grows half a foot. Its single terminal bud soon opens into a flat yellow disc of square-ended petals like a little windmill. This is the mouse-ear hawkweed. In full flower these hawkweed beds speckle the field. The blossoms seem arranged with purposeful geometric precision, and they mature and go to seed with marvelous unanimity. Then instead of yellow wheels, white puffy spheres dot the pasture and seem to float in a disconnected dancing layer above the ground of dark green leaves.

Along the borders where junipers are advancing, under the sheltering edges of their spreading branches and in damp meadow hollows, true mosses, the Bryophytes, colonize as microforests of closely packed stems tufted with primitive tiny leaves. At fruiting time each miniature tree grows from its top a smooth golden rod tipped with a knob where spores develop. Many of the mosses have been given common names from the shapes of their spore cases, names such as Crane's-bill and Hairy cap.

As summer advances, more showy plants catch your eye. Snapdragons bloom in rocky places: the yellow and orange Butter and Eggs, and a frailer plant of delicate branching structure bearing pale pink, lavender, and yellowish blossoms, so fragile that it is known as smoke flower. Roses bloom in the pastures too. The common hardy meadow rose drops its delicate pink petals soon after the buds open, unlike the deep pink & white Rosa rugosa, brought from Holland and England by the first settlers. Thin redtop grass envelops dwarf bushes in a veil of parallel stems and the roses loom liquidly like carelessly discarded submerged objects. Daisies and a taller, brighter kind of hawkweed invade the less-run-down meadows. In late July goldenrod blooms in August and wild spireas of the rose family, steeplebush and meadowsweet.

These threadbare pastures also support an association of birds and voles and insects. Often of an early June morning meadow grass is flecked with little globules of foam, made by the froghoppers-my brothers and I called them spit bugs--which who hide and keep moist under the bubbles of their secreted mucus while they suck the sap of juicy young plants.

Meadow voles build their interlacing grass-lined tunnels deep from sight on the earth floor of the meadow. But sometimes you can find the song sparrow and the white-throat under low spreading juniper / if you watch the birds to see where they go or chance to flush one from her eggs hide their nests under low spreading juniper, in the depths of a blueberry bush, or above the ground in the thicker junipers , but sometimes you can find their nests if you watch the birds to see where they go or chance to flush one from her eggs, but even then they are hard to find, so well are they hidden.

Nests are landmarks to those who know where they are. If the nest is near a path, they will make a circuit around it so a not to disturb the birds. You may hear a song sparrow sing from a mullein stalk and, being an insider so to speak in respect to the family arrangements, you can say with assurance that the bird is advertising his territory to other song sparrows, warning them to keep away from the nest you found the other day in the blueberry bush where his mate is nestling now, incubating a clutch of speckled eggs. And when the white-throat whistles from a spruce top at dusk, you know he is there because his nest is in a juniper not far out in the pasture.