



Ann Day  
(photo by Carly Stevens-McLaughlin)

## PROFILE

### Writer, Photographer Ann B. Day

#### A Student of Nature, a Friend of the Land

by Ricka McNaughton

This will tell you something about Ann Day. Once, a slug she found in a bathtub so excited her interest that she wrote a poem about it. Another time, outside her home near Waitsfield, Vermont, a menacing deerfly was strafing the air around her, angling for a fast bite. And then, quite suddenly, another insect snatched the deerfly out of the air. Ann alertly noticed where the snatcher had landed, so she went over to have a closer look. With unsqueamish interest she watched as her benefactor clasped its prey in a cage of spindly legs and sucked the bloody goodness out of its body. Afterward she looked up the insect and pegged it as a robber fly. Then, she used the experience as fodder for one of her nature articles.

As Ann explained, "I like to write about things other people don't tend to appreciate as much, such as dandelions, woodchucks, deerflies...and robber flies." All natural science, for her, is potently poetic. Approaching age 84, Ann has the cheerfully restless manner you sometimes see in people who manage to stay up to their necks in things that never lose the power to amaze them.

Ann's poems, stories, nature essays and photographs have been published nationally in magazines, books, newspapers and elsewhere. She is a regular contributor of articles to *The Valley Reporter*. In 2004 she published a selection of those pieces in a book called *The Nature of Things*, accompanied by her poems and photographs. Author/environmentalist Bill McKibben wrote of her collection, "*This book asks and answers precisely the kinds of questions that puzzle all of us casual lovers of the outdoor world...*"

In 2011, Ann collaborated on a book of poetry called *Rhythms of Nature* with David Parkinson, a native of Great Britain who spent 30 years as a gamekeeper on vast estates in Northern England. In addition, she produces annual engagement calendars, mingling her own photos and thoughts with those of others.

Though Ann attended college, she has no formal degrees relating to the study of bugs, birds, beasts, plants, or earth sciences. She received much of her inspiration and instruction in these subjects from



Nature itself, through her own inquisitive research and from an array of mentors. “I carry a magnifying glass with me at all times,” said Ann. Her writing expresses as much enchantment with the magic of the unknown as with the great span of things in nature she has come to understand well.

She was fortunate to have some special influences and advantages. “I grew up on my family’s farm – what you would call a gentleman’s farm -- outside of Boston, where I just loved being outdoors,” said Ann. “I was actually kind of a tomboy.”

Her father taught meteorology at nearby MIT. A very young Ann was often permitted to hang out and soak up the goings on in her father’s MIT lab, which pleased her no end, as she already shared her father’s vigorous spirit of inquiry into why, in the natural world, things are as they are. Ann told the story that, in the early 1930’s, her father and some colleagues managed to drive to the top of Mt. Washington in a restored 1913 Rolls Royce to collect fog droplets to see what they might contain. Back in the lab at MIT, analyzing those samples, they became the first to discern the problem of acid rain. Those findings were muffled for many years by auto industries and their supporters. It was a time when Detroit was ramping up mass production, and many in the country were glad of it.

“Both my parents supported me in everything I wanted to learn and do,” said Ann, which was quite a lot. But from very early childhood, more consistently than anything else, Ann felt driven to write. “I seem to do my most productive writing at momentous times of change in my life,” she observed. She has had her share of those as well. She has grappled with the untimely deaths of close family members, and she contracted polio as a young woman, leading to increasing problems with spinal stenosis and arthritis. It hasn’t deterred her from having a physically active life.

Ann has been an accomplished horsewoman, and involved in some way with horses both personally and professionally for much of her life. She first began riding at age 3. At the age of 8 or 9 she produced a working draft of her first novel about a fine black steed, the gist of which may have owed a little something to Anna Sewell’s beloved English classic *Black Beauty*. Ann related, “My grandmother was a friend of author Louisa May Alcott (author of the also-beloved American classic *Little Women*). One day, my grandmother took me to Ms. Alcott’s home in Boston, and I brought along my story called *Black Lightning* to get her opinion. Her brief advice to me was, well...to keep writing.”

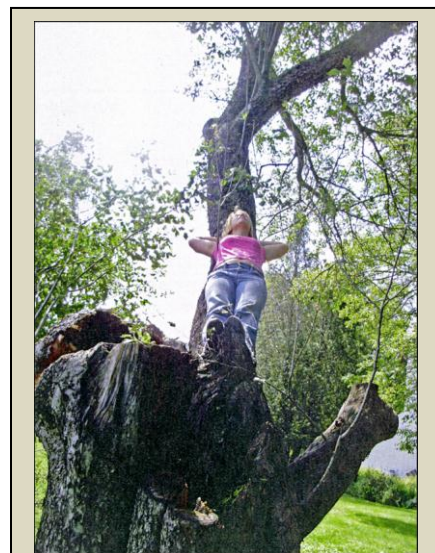


Photo by Ann Day, from  
*Poetry and Photos 2012,*  
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Because Ann and her husband Frank were both nationally certified ski instructors, they chose the Mad River Valley as their home in 1957, where they purchased a farm property near Waitsfield. The couple also operated the Knoll Farm Guest House there for many years. Among the animals they raised were Scotch Highland cattle, including a son of the grand champion sire of Scotland called Buccaneer. “He was ‘Bucky’ for short,” Ann said, “and you could ride on his back he was so gentle.” Ann reminisced that now and then Frank would be asked to furnish private skiing lessons to the rich and famous, and he once came home with actress Kim Novak in tow. She seemed pleased to kick back and live like family

at the farm for the duration of her stay in the Valley. “She would even do my hair for me,” recalled Ann. “It’s always been poker straight.”

In keeping with her values and love of the land, in 1983, Ann made a gift of the Knoll Farm’s 150 acres and buildings to the Vermont Land Trust (VLT). (Her husband Frank had passed away some years before.) It was the first conserved land donation in the Mad River Valley, and first ever in Vermont outside the Woodstock area, where the VLT had its beginnings as the Ottaquechee Land Trust. Ann’s gift was an influential move that touched off a rolling land conservation effort in Central Vermont. She continued to operate the guest house on the property until 2001, when the Knoll Farm was sold by the VLT to Peter Forbes and Helen Whybrow. The couple started their own farm and created the Center for Whole Communities, a hub of social and environmental programs whose mission is “reweaving people, land and communities.” Although her children and grandchildren now live far from Vermont, Ann still lives in a house on her beloved Knoll Farm and is much a part of the goings on there.

*If you’d like the chance to meet Ann, she’ll be giving a benefit reading of her poetry at the Blinking Light Gallery, 16 Main Street in Plainfield, Vermont, on Thursday April 26 at 6 pm. The reading is free and open to the public. Proceeds from the sale of her books and other work will go to help sustain the non-profit operations of the Gallery, a local artist’s cooperative.*

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*Written for [www.blinkinglightgallery.com](http://www.blinkinglightgallery.com)*