

The Smaller the Motor, the Bigger the Lake

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From about 1949 on, our family used a gasoline motor to propel our rowboat across Joes Pond in West Danville. We started with a 5-horsepower Atwater outboard, graduated to a 7.5 horsepower Evinrude and finally ended with a 9.9 horsepower Force. Each increase in power moved our 12-foot aluminum boat with a bit more excitement and speed.

About six years ago, my nephew Mark bought an electric motor for fishing. We would use the gas motor to zip to our favorite fishing spots and then lower the electric motor into the water to fish quietly.

Two years ago, when the Force lost its force and had zero trade-in value, we decided not to purchase a new gasoline motor. Since then, we have been using only the electric one, and our decision has brought a lot of joy and magic. The lake seems much bigger now, and more enjoyable.

For example, my son Erik and I were fishing one spring evening as a pair of nesting loons, first on the pond in recent memory, were brooding their egg on a cedar log raft that the Vermont Institute of Natural Science had anchored in the wetlands. The loons were hooting grand conversation at one end of the lake, and each echoing sound stabbed our souls as we moved quietly through the water at the other end. Had we owned a gas-powered motor, we would not have been able to hear the loons as crisply, if at all.

When we hear gas-powered boats go by, we often hear the occupants, too, because they have to yell to hear each other over the motor noise. Sound travels well over water. With an electric motor, all have quiet and privacy. We motor along the shore knowing we are not disrupting anyone, including the beavers, muskrats and other wildlife that can't hear us coming.

More important than the quiet is the lack of stench. Our gas motors were all 2-cycle, so we had to mix oil with the gasoline to lubricate the internal parts of the motor. At a slow troll, the exhaust would stink when the breezes came from the stern, and that was after the exhaust had been blown through the water near the propeller, filtering the pollutants through Joes Pond.

Once, I pulled up to a neighbors dock after changing the oil in our motor. Just sitting there, the spreading sheen of oil on the water's surface prompted my neighbor to ask if I had learned about boats, oil and water from Joe Hazelwood, captain of the *Exxon Valdez*!

When I bail rainwater out of our boat these days, there is no oily sheen on the lake afterward. When I bail out our neighbor's boat I end up so oily that I don't need suntan lotion for a week.

We so liked being free of the stench and scum of oil that we gave away our lawnmower, too. We now use a push mower. We no longer have to store gas and oil, which stink up the camp during the off season, never mind that a gallon of gas is roughly equivalent to a

dozen sticks of dynamite. It takes a while for the fire trucks from Cabot and Danville to drive the half-dozen miles to Joes Pond.

Buying our electric motor and battery costs about a third of what a new gas motor costs. Every couple days, we have to charge the battery. I once measured how much power it takes to charge it from dead to full power: about one kilowatthour, which costs about a dime. Two of us can ride back and forth to Hastings General Store three times – a total of about six miles – on one charge. A gas motor would cost several times as much for the same trips.

What about the environment? Without the stench, noise and oil pollution, we have a closer connection with nature. For example, you can't use the electric motor on very windy days. I remember, however, that on breezy days the gas motor gave us bone-bouncing rides anyway. Who needs that? If you hear thunder, you have to think about getting to shore directly, no matter what kind of motor you have. Electric motors are slower; you have to think ahead.

There are some very powerful boats on Joes Pond. I have ridden 90 miles per hour across the same water, which makes any ride at the Caledonia County Fair seem tame. Your cheeks ripple in a 90-mph wind, and fish may not be able to get out of the way of the propeller. But that trout-burger ride lasts only a few seconds. If the ride lasted longer than that, we would have to dig the boat out of the wetlands or pay to rebuild someone's camp after flattening it! The lake becomes small with such speed and power.

When people visit us, we often take long, gentle rides. "Gosh, how quiet it is here," they whisper. "Smell those fir trees. Look at that animal in the water up there."

I have spent 55 summers at Joes Pond. These days, there is much more for us to enjoy because we have discovered a new rule of boating: the smaller the motor, the bigger the lake.

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