

# The Teaching Forest

—*brother Augustine*



**O**UR FORESTS AND THE LIFE OF THE TREES AND ANIMALS they support have always been a mystery to me. What is the life of a forest, especially in the cool, green environment of summer, or in the quiet, snow-filled season of winter? When the community, in the early 70's, asked if anyone had the time to help with the care of our woodlands, I jumped at this opportunity. With little knowledge of forestry management I decided to learn by experience, with the trees as my teacher. Beginning by cleaning up dead trees and blow-downs with a sharp axe, I decided to dig out our old chain saw which had been abandoned for a few years. Fortunately there was a tree thinning program taking place nearby, and, not having much experience with a chain saw, I asked to come over and observe. The logger doing the work was an older, well-seasoned Vermonter who showed me how to handle a chain-saw safely. I then observed him for a while falling trees. He possessed a real art of reading each tree: the lean of the tree, and how to control its fall without damaging the other trees.

After working a little while in the woods, I began to observe the relationship of the animals to the trees. One early spring morning I entered the forest quietly and found, up ahead, a doe with her fawn feeding on the buds of the tops of trees we had cut the previous day. On another occasion there was a dead trunk of a tree in the area, with many woodpecker holes at the top. As I moved to cut the tree down the shadow of something gliding to the ground caught my eye. It was a "flying" squirrel, having glided down from its nest high in the tree. This species of squirrel has furry skin between its front and back legs with which it can glide for quite a distance. In



forestry terms, these dead trees are called den trees – good to keep a few in the woods for small animals and birds.

Then, after a few years of working in our forests, I began to wonder about our own relationship to the trees. During the processes of photosynthesis – the work of a tree to convert sunlight and carbon dioxide into energy – the trees offer us a healthy supply of oxygen. And during the long, cold winters in Vermont they provide us with solar-grown firewood to heat our monastery buildings. But the deeper questions still persist – what can a living forest tell us about ourselves as humans? Are trees, in a small way, able to give us a glimpse into the mystery of our place in nature in its fullness? Maybe these questions will be with us on the next walk or work period in the forest. ■

## Young ones

Walking, in winter,  
Through silent woods,  
As though through quiet rooms  
Full of young ones sleeping—  
The hour of spring-awakening  
Just ahead.