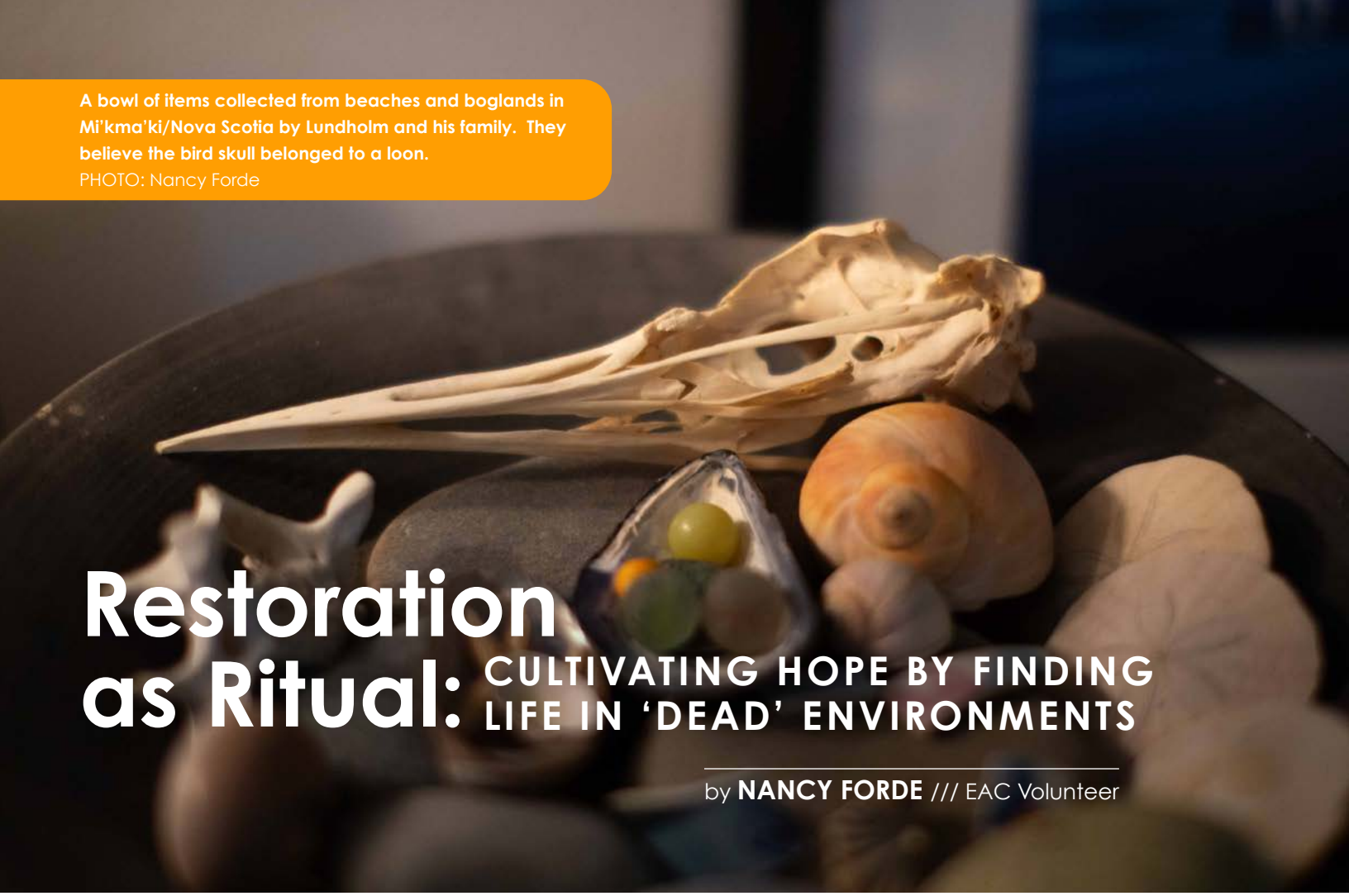

A bowl of items collected from beaches and boglands in Mi'kma'ki/Nova Scotia by Lundholm and his family. They believe the bird skull belonged to a loon.
PHOTO: Nancy Forde

Restoration as Ritual: CULTIVATING HOPE BY FINDING LIFE IN 'DEAD' ENVIRONMENTS

by **NANCY FORDE** /// EAC Volunteer

Nothing like when a passenger travelling next to you asks about your research trip focus and you respond, "death." Lately, I've been exhuming research on thanatology; the study of death and how communities perceive, mourn and mark it. For my current Master of Fine Arts pursuit, I'm writing a book on preservation and bog bodies – prehistoric humans deposited into peatlands across Northern Europe. During the Iron Age, around 600 BC to AD 400, most of the dead were cremated. Why were certain Iron Age humans murdered and placed in bogland instead? Scientists believe the practice involved ritual human sacrifice to Nerthus, an Earth goddess.

It's a wintry Thursday afternoon when I enter a second-floor room at the Central Library in Kjipuktuk/Halifax to attend a Death Café. The event may sound morbid, but it's a supportive space for people dying, grieving or pondering end-of-life preparation for themselves or their loved ones. Among those leading the meeting is Dawn Carson, President of the **Green Burial Society of Nova Scotia**, and a 'Death Doula' for **Grief Matters**. A discussion ensues on why death remains a taboo topic in North America compared to other cultures globally. As I'm Irish, I mention traditional customs of keening – waking deceased loved ones at home, sitting up and keeping their remains and spirit company in the days and nights following death.

Days later, with grief and ritual still haunting my thoughts, I meet with Dr. Jeremy Lundholm, a long-time adjunct professor of ecology at Saint Mary's University and research associate for **TransCoastal Adaptations Centre for Nature-based Solutions** and **CB Wetlands and Environmental Specialists**. He invites me to his home near Amntu'kati, the Mi'kmaq name for the area also known as Point Pleasant Park. Translated, Amntu'kati means 'spiritual place' or 'place of spirits.' What better spot to discuss death and life, grief and hope?

What does one unearth in an ecologist's home? Framed herbarium specimens related to Lundholm's doctoral dissertation hang upon earth-toned walls, alongside photographs of ferns and fiddleheads. A loon skull nestles amid snail shells, sea glass and sand dollars. Indoors is a veritable homage to outdoors.

Lundholm boils water and we settle opposite each other in the living area, where I sip tea infused with fennel and honey. I first met my humble host in July 2024 when he led a hike at Polly's Cove during **Wetlands Appreciation Week**. Lundholm is writing his own book on Nova Scotia's 'Barrens' and, because I've personally battled infertility, we begin by unpacking language. Lundholm remarks on the colonial ties to language that view areas as wasteland or solely in terms of usefulness to settlers, for purposes like resource extraction. Highly acidic with low oxygen, peatlands, among other wetlands, have long been termed 'barren' or 'lifeless' environments.

Nancy Forde (she/her) is an Irish-Canadian writer and documentary photographer. She, her teen and their dog recently moved to Kjipuktuk where she's currently pursuing her MFA, writing a book on Iron Age Bog People, death and preservation. Find out more at **linktr.ee/nancyforde**.

"When I think of bogs, time slows," explains Lundholm. "Sugar maple forests are considered 'productive' because they grow fast. Bogs are sloth-like." Bogs begin as lakes and form over thousands of years. Whenever I mention my own bog research, people sometimes picture the '**Dead Marshes**' of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The eerie depiction is not far off. Bogs are comprised of dead plant matter that builds up over millennia. Essentially, bogs are layered strata of geologic time, or 'Deep Time' death.

Certain plant life within bogs is even carnivorous. In raised wetlands, for instance, the only way to secure life-sustaining nutrients is to trap them. When an insect lands upon the sticky hairs of a sundew, its spindly arms, reminiscent of red veins, are triggered to fold inward. The plant holds and digests the insect over the course of two hours, then re-opens its arms for future food. Lundholm suggests pitcher plants are more passive in their nutrient capture. Their cups collect rainwater into which insects fall. Unable to escape, they drown. "Pitcher plants are their own ecosystem," Lundholm explains. "Certain mites live their entire life cycle within them eating whatever's trapped for decomposition." In bogs, death sustains life.

Some wetland areas are considered part of the 'Barrens' of Mi'kma'ki/Nova Scotia. The Barrens comprise open heathlands with rocky terrain and few trees. Lundholm's attraction to them is sensory. The painterly palette of lichens and moss. The taste of wintergreen. The cinnamon scent of crowberries. Lundholm relishes the redolent mixture of ocean and fresh phytoplankton, especially in summer when plants 'volatilize,' dispersing their vaporous essence. I ask: what first drew him to ecology?

"In high school, I heard about a research group doing ecological restoration and was hooked. Growing up in the '80s, news about acid rain and the ozone hole felt terrifying. For me, conservation plays a vital role, but ecological restoration offered an active element that appealed. It's interventionist, a way to get your hands dirty, literally and figuratively." When I ask what wetland flora or fauna he'd champion, he offers oyster plants, more whimsically known as 'sea bluebells.'

Lundholm sits on the board for the province's plant recovery team. He hopes through increased protection and restoration, plants might be monitored and championed before becoming endangered or extinct. He wonders what effect extirpated (locally extinct) fauna – like caribou, moose and wolves – would have had upon the province's prehistory. He mourns the loss of their presence.

Scientists believe Iron Age people regarded bogs as sacred environments, possibly preferred sites for ritual. I ask Lundholm whether events like his hike, people visiting land during Wetlands Appreciation Week or Earth Day, are akin to ancient rituals that celebrated environment as sacred? Lundholm names Bill Jordan III among the 'intellectual parents of ecological restoration' who regarded the work as ritual. Jordan's primary text **The Sunflower Forest: Ecological Restoration and the New Communion with Nature** summarizes the author's years of work on the topic. Might bird counting or seed planting count as kinds of ritual response to extinction? Might such acts heal eco-grief? Like the Green Burial Society and Death Café organizers, Lundholm believes part of healing is allowing ample space and time for grief, something as an ecologist he readily admits he's guilty of repressing. I don't want to end the interview on a sorrowful note. I ask him about hope.

How do ecologists and other environmentalists combat succumbing to despair or cynicism? Lundholm perks up, avowing "ecological restoration acknowledges humans are part of nature," one among myriad species who belong to Earth's singular ecosystem. He recounts a project in northern New Brunswick where he helped restore a cobble beach. The restoration led to piping plovers returning to nest there. "I'm still sent photographs of baby plovers," he says, smiling. "That lifts the heart, my spirit."

For me, connecting with environmental folks like Lundholm to learn more about ecological restoration lifts my own.

TAKE ACTION

Follow Dr. Jeremy Lundholm on the **iNaturalist** app, where he'll announce a forthcoming ecological restoration project. In the meantime, document coastal erosion and check out Coastie, another collaborative citizen science project at **coastiecanada.ca**

Ecologist Jeremy Lundholm is aptly framed by green plants at his home in Kjipuktuk/Halifax in January 2025. PHOTO: Nancy Forde