

# BOREAL BITS

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## WANDERING THROUGH NOVEMBER

*“To see a hillside white with dogwood bloom is to know a particular ecstasy of beauty, but to walk the gray winter woods and find the buds which will resurrect that beauty in another May is to partake of continuity.” Hal Borland*

November, while it may have many faces, provides us with the security of certain constants. We can be sure that all our greenery would have been stripped from the deciduous trees and shrubs by the time the eleventh month is upon us. We can count on a dearth of wildlife from insects up to birds. And we can count on the sun dropping lower in the sky on each successive day. Beyond that, November can hold a great variation in the weather it provides us, from balmy spring-like days to sub-zero

temperatures, and howling winds to snow piled high that won't disappear until spring.



Traditionally November is a gray month with overcast skies dulling the landscape and our senses.

For the month of November our column will present a series of walks, a different trek for each week. Our first walk is taken from the journal notes of 1999. As if to exit the old century in style, November of that year was

a marvelous month, warm for this time of year and generally bright. On the fourth of that month we took a walk on the trails in the vicinity of Norman Dam. The temperature hit a high of +4.2 C that day and with the sun shining sporadically, it provided enough heat to take care of the snow that had fallen a few days before when we caught the tail end of a Colorado Low.

As we began our walk, the sound of water rushing over the dam buried the silence. A wind whistled in the barren trees and filtered through the conifers. Occasionally a pine cone fell and landed in the understory. I looked for the squirrel that was causing this but none was in sight. The stump of a birch tree had rotted away leaving only the

bark, still strong and intact, forming a pail. Indians and early European settlers made containers out of this material (as well as canoes) because it is strong, long lasting and impervious to decay. Many plants in the herb layer (ground level) are still green and of these many will remain green throughout the winter to emerge from the snows in the spring and continue their work of photosynthesis.

We came across a shredded cones a favourite spot for meal. Some of these generations of large refuse piles. I my feet and noticed seeping from it. We harvest cones from



midden, the remains of indicating that this was squirrels to have a locations are used by squirrels and create looked at a pine cone at how much sap is watched squirrels the white pines and

other conifers on our property and marveled at the fact we have never seen a squirrel covered with sap. Does it not stick to its fur or is the squirrel just a good groomer? Another mystery for the question book.

It is obvious that we are past the mushroom/fungi season because the only mushrooms we see are dried dead carcasses, or those rotting on the ground. The fruit of the fungi have fulfilled their procreative purpose and are about to return to the soil that spawned them. A few mushrooms are drying on low shrubs or trees, put there by enterprising red squirrels or grey jays that will collect and store them. A fresh

mushroom would readily rot and spoil the other foodstuffs if they are stored in cone and seed caches.

Red pines drop their needles when the needles are about three years old. As these conifer leaves drop they fall to the understory and are caught by the shrubbery resulting in many red pine needle decorations that never reach the ground. On other occasions we have noticed red pine needles sticking from the snow like miniature forests.

Norm anoints a small spruce tree and then, in the manner of his wild ancestors, further marks the territory by kicking at the ground leaving scrape marks and his scent.

This kind of behaviour may be useful to a wolf or coyote but it



seems like so much excess baggage for a house dog.

As we approach the river we see a white pine that has succumbed to erosion and toppled into the water. It left a massive root cluster standing twice my height. It would be incorrect to use the term 'root ball' to describe the shallow root structures that eventually surrender to time. The mighty Winnipeg River has claimed countless trees this way and will continue to do so.

Wildlife, at least that which is visible to me, is very sparse. By the time the walk was finished we had noted one sparrow-like bird whose identity evaded us, three old familiar woodpeckers, and four ravens. In the river a small flock of goldeneye ducks

swam near a pair of mallards. I saw no gulls or crows. Had they left already? It is easy to tell when these birds arrive but quite difficult to pinpoint their departure.

The naturalist's walk is just that; go slowly, saunter, experiencing the secrets of nature. Snow will come soon enough and then there will be more secrets to discover.

Still, I miss the wildlife.

Our November walks continue next week.