



WALKING THROUGH NOVEMBER - Week 2

“We never railed at the storms, the furious winds, and the biting frosts and snows... Bright days and dark days were both expressions of the Great Mystery.” Luther Standing Bear, Teton Sioux

It is the second week in November and as we review the journals for past Novembers we realize that this month, like most, is prone to wide variations in climate. However, there are some constants; one being the shortening of the photoperiod (hours of daylight) and the dropping of the mean daily temperature viewed best from a graph read at the end of the month when the trend is readily noticeable.

In 1996 there was a good layer of snow on the ground by the time the second week ended. In fact, this year was among our heaviest of snow years when drifts measured 3.3 metres (4 ft) at the end of January 1997. The walk at this time took us out on the trails of

Tunnel Island, an increasingly popular hiking area. The proximity of two branches of the Winnipeg River provide ample wildlife during the peak months, and the lack of development offers greenery untouched since the island was cleared of white pines



during the latter part of the 19th century.

Although the sun begins retreating on the solstice in June, it takes a few months for the cooling of our hemisphere to be noticed. By the time November rolls around we are really into it.

Short photoperiod, long nights, weak slanted sun rays; all contribute to the rapid cooling that allows precipitation to fall as snow and remain on the ground so that months hence when spring finally comes, that same snow is the last to melt.

In 1996 snow fell and remained in early November so that by the time of our walk, it was up to our ankles. Certainly not enough for snowshoes but enough to transform the dull brown world of late fall into a bright, though almost monochromatic, winter world.

Norm our pooch came with us that day, but, as usual, this is not always a good idea. We first noticed small canine footprints on the side of the path and because I was able to fit two knuckles of one hand into a print determined it was a red fox. Norm wanted to know what had captured our interest and nosed his way in, obliterating the very tracks we were

investigating. By this time Norm's muzzle and underbelly were coated with wet, sticky snow made more so by the warmth of his body. The fox would not be iced up like this; being a wild animal, it evolved a good coat with sufficient insulation to avoid such problems.

Beaver Lodge Pond was iced-over by that time and tracks, red fox as determined by the gait and pattern, crossed the fresh snow. Norm who is only 14 kg (31 lbs) leaves much larger prints than his distantly related cousin.

The colours of winter were obvious: dark, dull green of the conifers, steel-grey of the

water and black

white of the

and shadows.

pattern was

by the vivid

blue jay and of

the deep blue of

cloudless sky. A



and

snow

The

broken

blue of a

course

the

small

flock of evening grosbeaks provided a splash of yellow but not nearly as vibrant as it

would be during the breeding season.

It was a good year for pine cones and that made the crossbills and squirrels happy. For the smaller birds the 1.7 m (5 ft) spires of the common mullein, the dark seed heads of the tansy and numerous seeds of other plant life offered sustenance. Knee Pond was half frozen, a result of the surging current of the river that wends through the breakwater built when Norman Dam was constructed. The sun, so rarely seen during the eleventh month,

was making picket-fence shadows along the path as it filtered through the leafless trees. Robin Pond, also known as Sandy Nook was frozen and snow-covered. Recent otter activity was obvious as running footprints evolved into 4 m (12 ft) slide patterns as the otters tobogganed on the flat surface. This resident mammal doesn't need a hill to have fun.

Deer tracks traveled up to a ridge and from all appearances, the path is well used by a number of deer. The rut had begun as evidenced by the number of antler-raked shrubs we saw along the way. I am sure that by simply



changing the date this article could well be describing next week's walk, given the same weather conditions.

As we returned we notice there were no crows and gulls. Obviously they had migrated but when did they go? It is easy to determine when they arrive, but the fall migration is much more difficult to pinpoint.

Our November walks continue next week.