

BOREAL BITS

PHIL BURKE



NOVEMBER WALKS – PART 3

“What is life? It is the flash of a firefly in the night. It is the breath of a buffalo in the winter time. It is the little shadow which runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset.” Crowfoot



Our treks through November continue with a walk through the surrounding bush or snow that was dumped by a mid-month storm in 1996 giving us 40 cm. (16 in.) over a period of 36 hours. The temperature ranged between -0.3°C and -4.1°C , contributing to a very heavy wet snowfall. That resulted in a snow day for the school children as the back roads in the community were cleared.

(Photo by PB)

Our tube-style hanging feeders were busy since the snow arrived. The winter-resident chickadees and red-breasted nuthatches made continual trips and although both species of birds took the black sunflower seeds away with them, the nuthatches have the peculiar habit of tossing three to four seeds aside before finding one to their liking. I tried to determine what influences their choice (possibly cracked partially open seeds, or seeds already husked) but I was unable to come to any conclusion. Of course the chickadees will sometimes have a snack at the feeder by holding the seeds between their feet and pound the seeds open with their tiny bills. Blue jays flash to the platform feeder (a 4x8 piece of chipboard that we affix to our rear deck railing once the possibility of bear raids is past) and load up their throat sacs the same way chipmunks fill their cheek pouches. rodent attempts to chase the competition away but usually gives it up as the persistent birds realize the little brown flash of fur can't be everywhere at the same time. During this week, Nancy called to report seeing a robin; it is certainly a rarity but over the years more than a few robins have wintered in the area. Why this particular bird decided to remain long after most of its kind had migrated is a mystery, although one could speculate that it was wounded in some way and being unable to handle long stretches of flying, fell behind the others. Another possibility is that it was just one bone-idle bird that couldn't be bothered.

The bush trail had been visited by snow machines within the past day or so and for this I



was grateful. A compressed path makes for much easier hiking, something that deer learned long ago. The deep snow covered much of the deer browse and the deer must take to feasting on leaf buds, mosses, and cedar foliage. Terminal buds of pine are also on the menu.

(photo by J. Stockham)

The snow along a particular stretch of the path is covered with a light dusting of alder seeds that fly from those tiny pine-like cones that have long been a favourite material for crafters. There are two species of alder shrubs in our region and they both have the same thing in common; they grow in thickets that are extremely difficult to walk through. Often a hiker is advised to walk around these tangles of shoots.

This walk took us to a marsh and the surrounding lowlands are a favoured habitat for black spruce, a tree that more than any other conifer represents the boreal forest. These trees, unlike their closely related cousins, the white spruce, are not beautifully symmetrical and often are seen standing in low, wet areas, dark and thin with knobby

tops, the latter caused by the clustering of the upper most branches into what is known as crows' nests.

As in many snowy winter walks we were fascinated with the cascading effects of snow-weighted branches. A slight breeze, a bird or red squirrel may cause some snow to loosen and fall; it strikes other snow-laden branches and the domino effect continues until an avalanche of white plunges through the evergreen foliage to the ground.

The ice in the marsh is thick enough to support our weight though thin enough to cause a rippling effect on the water beneath. Around us is the aftermath of the heavy wet snow that fell a few days before. Spruces for the most part, are able to shed the snow but some catch too much and bend over, their tops almost touching the ground and forming living arches. Other trees like birch are lithe and supple enough to bend with the weight of the snow and return to their former position when the burden is gone.

As we turned to leave we noticed the cattail heads, each with their gift of many thousands of seeds. The seed heads looked like they were covered with brown mouse fur but as time continued the ravages of weather caused the heads to disintegrate, sending the parachute equipped seeds drifting on the air currents to begin colonies of the plants elsewhere. Some heads don't fluff due to a worm that spins a silk jacket holding in the seeds so that the resident worm may feed and live in peace.