

BOREAL BITS

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NOVEMBER WALKS – PART 4

*“White and pure with winter’s blanket,
Remote, serene, sleeping.” Doris Speight*

We conclude our November Walks with entries from a year when the end of the month saw us caught in the merciless grasp of a cold winter. Snow had finally come to stay on the 21st of the month, beginning in the afternoon and dumping 5 to 7 cm (2-2.5 in) before the temperature rose slightly to change the precipitation to spitting rain. Then the temperature dropped again and more snow fell leaving us with 13 cm (6 in). It is strange how the calendars determine that winter should begin on the 21st of December when we who live in Northwestern Ontario know that this season arrives anytime after October and some years doesn’t even wait until Hallowe’en before loading us with snow. But snow is welcomed by many creatures and not just those whose snow machines are idling in their garages waiting for enough white stuff to put them to good use.

The millions of tiny mammals that skitter among the dead grasses and under leaf litter welcome the snow for two reasons; first, it insulates them from severe cold and it also affords them protection from the many predators that rely on mice, voles and shrews to carry them through the winter.



Our walk took us along a favourite trail by the river and on this particular morning the temperature was crouching at -18°C at 8 a.m., although it did rise to a high of -8°C before the day was finished. Experience has taught us that the ice in the bay is a living, breathing entity, as it expands and contracts with each breath. Overnight it can freeze over and yet, if the day warms or if the wind is able to create turbulence, the ice can retreat almost to the shorelines while it waits for more cold.

The cold didn't seem to bother the flock of about 50 goldeneye ducks that paddled and foraged in the bay. Goldeneyes seem to enjoy water regardless of the temperature and I have even observed them paddling

happily (at least I think they were happy) in the open portions of the river when the thermometer read -40°C . Of course the temperature of water is always around zero and with a good food supply and good insulation these ducks can handle it.

An adult eagle appeared over an island and began circling high above the ducks. A few years ago I watched in fascination as an eagle took a golden eye duck from this very bay and I wondered if the scenario would be repeated. The eagle must have found a thermal, a rising current of warmer air, because it began rising higher with each circle it flew even though it wasn't flapping its wings. It was joined by another eagle and the two of them continued rising on the airy elevator until they were specks against the blue sky. The ducks were spared. Most of our eagles leave the area but a few tough it out. Those that do leave fly far enough south to find open water; they don't bother to fly all the way to the tropics like many smaller birds. Most ducks will fly far enough south to ensure them open water and a good food supply. What encourages certain ducks to remain in what little open water we have, is a mystery.

At certain times, when the sun is shining and the temperature has created ice crystals on the banks of the bay and river, the ice sheets, and coated trees, shrubs and branches, we

experience a glittering world of diamonds more beautiful than anything created in the jeweller's shop. This was one of those times and the effect was dazzling. In some places the ice crystals shone like stars on a pure white background.

If I wanted to see bird life, I had to watch the feeders at home. The only birds that we saw besides the eagle and ducks were a few ravens, one of which croaked its way across the sky. Tough birds, all of them; certainly tougher than we were because we were getting cold and forced to return to the comforts of home.