

BOREAL BITS

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JANUARY and FEBRUARY

“It was one of those sharp winter mornings when everything is as bright and brittle as glass. The trees, coated with hoar frost, seemed to have been sweating ice; the earth rang under a footstep, the dry air carried the slightest sound to a distance, the blue sky seemed to shine like a mirror, and the sun, dazzling and cold itself, shed upon the frozen universe rays which did not warm anything.” Guy de Maupassant 1885

As the days lengthen imperceptibly, we find ourselves locked in the dead of winter, a long way from the rebirth that begins in April on a good year and during some fortuitous years, as early as March. What will January and February hold this year? To answer this we have to look back to previous years and for this we turn to the journals, and in particular to the observations made last year. The journals are becoming fatter by the year as I find myself concentrating on the very small as well as the very large, the eagle soaring in an azure heaven, and the five-legged ant limping across a gravel roadway with the carcass of a Mayfly in its jaws. Nature study involves the eagle, the ant and

everything in-between, along with the medium in which they live whether this be air, soil, water, or a combination of these.

A year ago January as I walked the river trail, I noted that the ice was so extensive that a small animal could cross to the various islands without getting its feet wet. No sooner had I made this observation than I saw a dark-phase red fox with a huge fluffy plume of a tail trailing behind it make the trek across the ice. The fox was alert and healthy, nothing like



the staggering, pitiful beasts that are victims of sarcoptic mange that we see all too often. The cloud cover began to tear away from the western horizon at about the same time that pressure on the ice in the bay caused it to rumble and crack, sending a ricocheting echo snaking down the length of the ice, a sound not uncommon to those living near water.

A few eagles decided to remain for the winter and

with the open water of the river they were able to fish. They would have completed their menu with ever-present roadkill, winterkill, and the odd goldeneye duck that was unfortunate enough to meet with the raptor's talons.

By the time February arrives I find myself waxing a little philosophical for the spring that is so far away and yet so close. A question that arose from last February's ramblings asked, "If the year has a home, in what season can it be found?" After reasonable contemplation, I came to the conclusion that spring is the season the year calls home and the purpose of all the other seasons is to bring us back to spring. If this were not so, why would leaf buds, like those resting dormant on trees and shrubs, appear long before the leaves fall? Why would many birds hone their skills for the spring season of mating and family rearing? Why would the leaves of autumn cover the forest floor like a blanket and then decay so nutrients would be available for new growth?

And a final observation. If I walk with my head up, eyes surveying the ever-changing panorama above me, I see the eagles, the ravens, and other birds. But I miss the minutia that is below my feet, the meandering snow trails of rodents, the story of life and death as a weasel pounced on a vole, the tracks of the snowshoe hare as it bounded across the snowscape, the fox slinking through the bush in search of a meal, and the bolls created by insects so that their larvae can doze through the coldest winter days.

On one day last February, a deer family, a doe and two fawns walked from the trees and crossed our back yard. In January when I stepped onto the rear deck to take a picture this family bolted and we didn't see them again for two days. On this February day they stopped and stared at me intently, sure that I was not a threat but cautious nonetheless. I talked to them and whistled a light little tune. Two days before, they came to eat the

sunflower seeds that had blown from the platform feeder that is too high for them to reach. They are pretty, healthy animals but becoming thinner with each passing day. For most of the creatures that are up and about during this most severe and challenging season, January and February present a cruel test of survival.