

BOREAL BITS

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OVER A DECADE OF OBSERVATIONS Part 1

'Nature gives to every time and season some beauties of its own; and from morning to night, as from the cradle to the grave, it is but a succession of changes so gentle and easy that We can scarcely mark their progress.' Charles Dickens (1812-1870)

It has been more than ten years since my first nature column appeared in print. That's well over five hundred columns and in these we have discussed everything from the lowliest of lows to the highest of the highs, from mites that inhabit the duff on forest floors to eagles soaring in thermals high above us, and from the murky depths of northern lakes to the upper atmosphere and beyond. It has been a journey, one that has taken us into marvellous places, made us contemplate our human existence and our place on this planet. But it is a journey just began and despite the hundreds of pages of manuscript, we have barely scratched the surface. When I first started writing the column a friend asked in all seriousness, "What are you going to do when you run out of things to write about?" There's no need to worry; it will never happen.

A shrew uncovers a clutch of grasshopper eggs, an osprey plucks a northern pike from the water and a garter snake captures and swallows a leopard frog. A snapping turtle plucks a common merganser duckling from the surface and its mother doesn't even know it is missing. A swarm of dragonflies enter a cloud of

gnats and decimate it. It is unfortunate that wildlife in Africa receives much more press than that which surrounds us, however, Canadian and American photographers, cinematographers and writers are producing more than ever about their homelands. We are learning more about our local environment and the more informed we are, the better decisions we can make when confronted with difficult choices.



(P. Burke)

Certainly nature has been of interest to me all my life but during the last decade it has become a consuming passion. It all began when I experienced a 'Road to Damascus' revelation in 1988 while canoeing with Jeff, our eldest son who was home from university for a visit. We were canoeing in the Winnipeg River when suddenly a huge splash resounded behind us. I turned expecting to see a beaver disappearing beneath the waves but instead I was thrilled beyond belief to see an osprey pumping into the air grasping a huge white sucker in the talons of one foot. The raptor rose dramatically and eventually dropped the fish as it attempted to adjust its hold.

We had lived in the Kenora area since 1969 and while busying myself with family, dealing with a career, and life in general, I had acquired next to no depth of knowledge of the world that surrounds us except that which I encountered on a daily basis. Until that time I had not sought a deeper understanding of what faced me every day and, I am embarrassed to admit it, but I had no idea of whether the trees our young sons had helped us transplant beside the driveway were spruce, pine, fir or whatever.

Thus began a quest that the local newspaper agreed to share in 1994. The only problem is that after all these years of nature study (only a part of which is birding) I find that I know so much less than I thought I knew back in the eighties. But then I remembered the spin-doctors and hunted until I came across this gem: “A good naturalist is not one who knows all the answers, but rather one who can ask all the questions.”



(J Wedel)

My interest takes me from the parasitized pupa of the army worm to the aerial acrobatics of a common raven that brings life to February skies. It involves climbing into a bear den scooped from a sandy bank on Lake of the Woods, and having the good fortune to be invited along on various bald eagle surveys and banding operations with the likes of local biologist Scott Lockhart, one of many keenly interested and dedicated people working with the Ministry of Natural Resources.

I also learned that it is not necessary to travel more than a few minutes from home to encounter experiences that are entirely new and exciting. The neighbours must have wondered what I was doing lying on a stretch of bedrock behind our house while I was engrossed on ant-watching for nearly an hour. From this experience I learned that ant soldiers fight to kill as another ant of the same species but obviously another nest, wandered into the wrong territory. The nearby lakes, streams, rivers and forested areas hold as many secrets as those five, ten or a hundred kilometers away. Other areas hold their own secrets but there are enough to discover here in our area to fill a hundred libraries.