

BOREAL BITS

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OVER A DECADE OF OBSERVATIONS – Part 2

‘Surely there is something in the unruffled calm of nature that over-awes our little anxieties and doubts: the sight of the deep-blue sky, and the clustering stars above, seem to impart a quiet in the mind.’ Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)

It has been more than ten years since the first nature column appeared in the local newspaper and this week we continue summarizing our experiences over the last decade. The more I delved into the nature surrounding us, the more exciting the journey became. But not everyone shares an interest in that which is not manmade and I understand and accept that. During one very bad army worm spring (a phrase understood by any resident of our area) I had been studying these insects and learned that adults moths lay anywhere from 150 to 350 eggs per cluster. When I shared this with an acquaintance along with the fact that the parasitic flies were beginning to wreak havoc with the pupae, he politely told me that maybe he had to put up with them but he didn't have to learn about them. In the same vein, I like to tell this story. When a friend and I pulled into the lot at Safeway the other day, I almost stepped on the carcass of a gull. “Oh look,” I said, “a dead gull.” “Where? Where?” exclaimed my friend as he scanned the sky.

My study of nature has left me with these five generalized truisms:

- a. Critters can't read; that is, they don't always behave the way books say they should.
- b. Nature is anything but a gentle mother. Death is part of life.
- c. The more you fish the more fish you get; the more time you spend observing nature, the more you see.
- d. There seems to be a grand plan beyond the comprehension of such a lowly mortal as I.
- e. Everything deserves a space.



(P Burke)_

Following are a few of the experiences I have encountered that demonstrate one or more of the preceding principles:

One March I watched in awe as an eagle hunting and finally caught a golden eye duck that dove every time its attacker flew over. The eagle finally succeeded by performing a very un-eagle-like behaviour of hovering above the water, waiting until it could see the duck and then plunging completely into the water in a style more reminiscent of ospreys than eagles. When it finally caught the luckless duck in its talons, the eagle was so exhausted it lay atop the water with its wings outstretched for three or four minutes before doing the butterfly stroke to shore. On one of my many visits to a heron colony I witnessed a sibling-cide whereby a large juvenile had forced its sibling onto a branch near the nest but refused to allow it to return. Adult herons feed their older young by regurgitating whole fish into the nest and without a place at the family table, the expelled young one starved.

At the same colony, an adult bald eagle flew over the colony and swept down to capture a young heron. It missed but succeeded in knocking the young bird from the nest into the dense undergrowth into which no adult heron would dare go to feed its offspring. The young heron was unhurt by the fall but would have starved without adults to feed it.



(P Burke)

While on the topic of this colony that was established in 1995 when the birds moved three or four kilometres from another area, nature brewed up a windstorm on June 10, 2002 that destroyed the colony leaving only two nests with chicks. Over fifty nests were destroyed. Most of the downed nests fell when the wind pushed the trees over, or the nests were swept from the trees by the horrific winds. Needless to say, the colony was not reestablished in that area.

Two crows double-teamed an osprey by landing in the tree in which the raptor was preparing to eat a fish. One bird waited below while the other approached it tauntingly as if trying to cause the osprey to drop the fish or abandon it at which time the crows would have lunch. The osprey held its ground and finally the crows became bored and flew off to try some other game.

A female deer and two fauns were feeding on the shores of the river in early September when, to my surprise, the female submersed her head up to her ears in a great imitation of a moose. Shortly thereafter, one of the fawns suddenly had an attack of happy feet and gamboled up and down the shoreline. It was ignored by its sister and mother.

Our impressions of the last ten years continue next week.