

BOREAL BITS

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OVER A DECADE OF OBSERVATIONS – Part 3

'In those vernal seasons of the year when the air is calm and pleasant, it Were an injury and sullenness against nature not to go out and see her riches, and partake in her rejoicing with heaven and earth.' Milton (1608-1674)

This week we are looking back at ten years of experiences that have contributed to our collective knowledge of nature in our corner of the boreal forest. While we were shoveling snow off the deck one evening, a shadow appeared in a tree that turned out to be a barred owl. It flew from its perch near the deck to a tree about five metres away where it waited until the night grew late and we gave up. We suspect the deck area was of interest to the owl because of the seeds that would drop from the bird feeders and attract rodents. We arrived home one fall afternoon to meet a yearling bear walking across our back yard. It ran when it saw us and scampered up a huge jack pine. I called my wife Pat to have a look assuring her that if the bear decided to come down, we would have all kinds of warning because the tree was a tangle of branches. The bear apparently thought we were coming to do it harm and slid down that tree so fast I still have trouble believing it. When the bear hit the ground it took off for the bush. If I thought the bear moved fast, it was nothing compared to how fast

Pat ran because as the bear was running into the bush, Pat was locking herself inside the garage.

There are a few experiences that haunt me and one involved a female merganser with one chick. Mergansers have very large clutches and this sad sight represented the highest degree of predation and duckling mortality. Or so I thought. I have since learned that it is common for merganser families to become integrated when parents pause for a meeting. When they swim off, often they leave with more (or fewer) ducklings. The lonely duckling scene was tempered a few days later by the sight of a female merganser with 14 ducklings, half of which, I am sure, belonged to the other merganser mom.



(P Burke)

Another haunting memory is of a third osprey chick. I had been monitoring the nest site since the adults returned in April and had carefully recorded the growth of two osprey chicks. In mid-July I was surprised to see a third chick, this one about half the size of its siblings, raise its wobbly head before dropping out of sight behind the nest rim. I didn't see it again, but the two larger chicks lived to fledge. Question: what happened to the third chick? Did a parent toss it from the nest? Was it eaten? I have yet to find out what happens when an osprey chick dies in the nest. Marsh hawks will feed the dead chick to its siblings and this has been recorded but in that osprey are fish eaters, would they do the same thing? There are always more questions than answers.

When I retired, one of the gifts I received was a very fine Tilley hat, the type that can pass through an elephant and after a washing looks as good a new. My hat

was put to the ultimate test... and failed. I wore it during a trip to the heron colony and apparently came too close to a nest tree because the juvenile above took exception to my presence and vomited a terrible mixture of half-digested fish onto my Tilley. Needless to say, the hat was scarred for life.

A young American man was fishing at Norman Dam when my son and I were out for a walk. A raccoon pup wandered out of the woods and attempted to take some of the minnows out the half-litre milk container the man was using as a minnow bucket. Undeterred from his mission of catching the big one, the man shooed it away and held up the container with his free hand. Also undeterred, the raccoon pup began to climb the man's pant leg on his mission to get the minnows. I intervened and lifted the pup off the man, grasping it by the scruff of its neck, as a cat would carry her young. The raccoon followed me and we went crayfish hunting among the rocks along the shore. When I caught one the pup went wild, gnashing its teeth and growling fiercely. I dropped it immediately and the little beast consumed it but from then on he considered me his provider and followed me everywhere. When it was time for us to leave, I placed the pup in a tree and we ran for the car but the little raccoon scampered down the tree and caught us before we were at the road. The only thing that enabled us to get away was a half-eaten Dairy Queen cone I found and tossed it to the little raccoon. We escaped while it was eating. I assume the little critter would reunite with its mother. Observing interaction between species is one of the more interesting aspects of nature study and for this, the quick eye and camera of Ken Chambers wins the prize for his great photographs of a young domestic cat attempting to interest a young black bear in play.



(K Chambers)

There are many residents who share their nature pictures and stories and for this I am grateful. Of course, experiences with nature, with wildness, is one of the main reasons our area trebles in population each summer and why some of us who move here for 'a few years' end up remaining for more than a few decades.