

BOREAL BITS

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OVER A DECADE OF OBSERVATIONS – Part 4

‘There are two aspects in Nature: the perishable and the imperishable. All life in this world belongs to the former, the unchanging element belongs to the latter.’ Bhagavad-Gita (sacred Hindu text c. B.C. 400)

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.

I would be remiss if I did not offer a special thanks to those people who have assisted me in my journey of discovery. Foremost among these are Scott Lockhart of the Ministry of Natural Resources whose work with eagles in the area has been most enlightening and Leo Hintz, Kenora’s preeminent birder. Lil Anderson who operates Iggy’s Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre always has interesting stories at hand and I thank her for her contribution. Also deserving thanks are those who have contacted me regarding their experiences with our local natural acquaintances. Kathy has kept me apprised of beavers, deer at her bird feeders, a black liquorice-stick caterpillar and a merganser that nested in the chimney of an abandoned cabin. Glenn Reynard, the original Father Goose—so named long before the movie of that name—and his continuing goose story is always interesting along with tales of other creatures that he encounters. There have been many other contributors over the years, each one contributing to my knowledge and providing fodder for this column. There was an invitation to witness a swarm of

hummingbirds jostling for position around the feeders, a mallard duckling with the fishhook through its bill, the barred owl that was poisoned, the snowy owl that became a traffic casualty, the sharp shinned hawk that pestered the family of wood ducks until they abandoned the nest site, the robin that stayed over winter, the eagle that was determined to scare a Canada Goose off its nest, the pileated woodpecker that insisted on digging into good, solid cedar siding, and the otters that poked their heads through the thin skin of ice causing one man to ask if we had seals in Rabbit Lake.



(P Burke)

These and many other shared stories reaffirm the fact that the collective knowledge of the residents of our area is a marvellous resource to be tapped. One person is an expert on warblers; for most of us they are a confusion of small colourful birds that move so fast we have trouble identifying them. Another person watched snapping turtles emerge from the soil in one of the few nests that was not destroyed by predators. Another witnessed a family of red foxes emerge from the den for the first time and continued the vigil until they abandoned it altogether. Another worked for years as a professional meteorologist and now willingly shares his knowledge with others. A retired geologist offers field trips. A family watches from their dining room window as a pair of robins builds a nest, and raise young. And this is just the beginning. Collective knowledge is indeed invaluable.

For many of us the study of nature is a hobby, a passion that drives us to suffer the scourge of insects, the drizzle of an early morning, the frigid temperatures of a January walk, the odd bout of poison ivy and the heat of a summer afternoon. At the same time it affords us solitude, a communing with forces greater than ourselves and an acquaintance with mysteries so profound we are in awe. It is most rewarding, and at the very least humbling. No, it would be impossible to run out of topics for a nature column. If there ever is an everlasting story, we are living in its midst.



(P Burke)

I enjoy spending time out there and the solitude it offers, despite the discomfort of weather and biters of which there is no shortage during late spring and summer. My hobby, my avocation, my job, allows me to be childlike in my explorations of the world outside my door. In fact, all the encounters with nature mentioned previously took place within fifteen or twenty minutes from our door either by foot, by bike, canoe or car.

It was the ancient Greek philosopher Zeno who wrote, “The aim of mankind is to live in agreement with nature.” It is interesting to note that the writer did not use the terms ‘subservient to nature, or ‘in domination of nature’, but rather ‘in agreement with nature.’