

# BOREAL BITS

PHIL BURKE



## THE SNAPPER – PART 1

“The sum total of an animal’s needs is expressed in its habitat” J. Benyus ‘Northwoods Wildlife’

The snow had at last leached into the forest soil as May flitted upon the scene. The winter had been long, hard, and cold, and April was more a part of winter than spring. Little was green except for a few ground plants that hugged the forest floor and remained green throughout the winter. Ice had disappeared from the river and the larger bays but the smaller ponds were still locked under an icy lid. During the warm spell in the last few days of April, melt water had flooded the pond surface staining it a muddy brown.

The pond was dug over a century ago by a construction crew that needed sand for a hydro project. Within a week water from a very high water table had filled the depression. The workers cursed and abandoned the pit to find another deposit of sand left behind during the retreat of the last glacier. Soon reeds and cattails took root along with underwater plants and wildlife was quick to follow. Reptiles and amphibians soon found the pond along with minnows and other

small fish. The latter may have found their way there in the mud on the feet of water birds and mammals. Many years ago a young beaver, driven from its home had investigated the pond as a possible lodge site. However, instinct decreed that the pond was not deep enough to provide open water throughout the hard winters and the beaver moved downriver to build a bank lodge. Today, the only evidence of beaver activity was a few blackened and decaying, gnawed stumps in the ravine south of the pond.



photo Phil Burke

A raven landed on a black spruce on the southern edge of the pond. This was his breeding territory and he and his mate had begun a family by mid-March when the forest offered a bleak arctic world. The birds had raised three successive broods in a jack pine atop the ridge within view of the pond. In June of last year the raven had watched a large female snapping turtle mating with a smaller male. In early July he had seen the same female pull itself onto the sandy northern shore of the pond and plod heavily up the slope. Then it

stopped and began to scratch a hole with its back feet in which it laid twenty white, leathery, ping-pong ball sized eggs. The raven took notice of this and after the huge turtle had buried the eggs, smoothed the surface sand with its tail and plastron, and returned to the pond, the bird investigated. It tried to dig into the sandy soil but the eggs were too deep.

Two weeks later the raven witnessed the death of the female at the hands of two boys who killed the snapping turtle because it was a snapping turtle. Unlike their smaller cousins, the painted turtles, snappers are unable to withdraw their head and legs within the protection of the hard shell. Perhaps this is the reason snapping turtles evolved the violent, aggressive behaviour for which they were named. Surprisingly, in water the snapper is a gentle beast that most often abandons this behaviour in favour of a quick escape. The boys left her carcass on the shore of the pond and the raven and his mate were two of the many benefactors of this largess.

On a late July night a raccoon family was foraging at the pond. The mother of the three pups nosed the sand very carefully and suddenly began to dig. She unearthed the cache of turtle eggs and her excitement caught the attention of



Photo – Phil Burke

her pups for they joined her, each eating its fill. The night sounds of wavelets, amphibians, insects and loons drifted across the pond and the mother raccoon analyzed every one. Then a great horned owl hooted its mournful call nearby.

The mother rose on her back feet and sniffed the air. A great horned owl would like nothing more than a fresh young raccoon so the mother led her pups into dense undergrowth. The raccoon family left eight eggs untouched. Twenty days later those eggs began to hatch.

It was late evening when the first little turtle, the size of a dollar coin, broke through the sand and instinctively heading for the pond. A foraging gull, ever alert, glided overhead and saw the activity. It gave a call and swooped to the ground. Five other gulls joined the first and within minutes five little turtles disappeared down the gullets of the ravenous scavengers. The raven and his family didn't have a chance.

As the moon rose in the eastern sky sending golden shafts of light across the pond, its light revealed the carnage that was the turtle nest. The remains of torn shells littered the ground. Then a little head popped through the sandy soil, followed shortly after by the other two. Unaware of the danger, the little reptiles scrambled for the water but the danger had passed.

The two baby turtles, all males, took a long drink and then instinctively sought refuge among the reeds. At the time food was unimportant for they would survive on energy stored in the yolk sac attached to their abdomens. By the time they were a few days old the egg tooth that helped them cut their way out of the eggshells fell off and the little turtles began to forage on their own. Next week we continue our journey through the month of May at the pond.