THE SNAPPER – PART 2

There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature - the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after the winter. - Rachel Carson

Spring finally advanced on the pond as a stubborn winter left in late April. The strong May sun was rapidly decaying the ice and thawing the forest. Walls of ice that had poured from rocky cliffs in the northern exposure were shrinking daily. Green life appeared as if by magic. Leaf buds swelled and split, and green leaf tissue unfurled like little flags catching sunlight so photosynthesis could begin to work its magic. At the end of the first week of May an otter stepped onto the ice thinking to cross the expanse of the pond as he had done many times throughout the winter. He didn't need a snow-covered hillside to slide upon; indeed, snow or ice on a flat surface—or mud for that matter—would serve just as well. But the ice couldn't support him and he broke through. For any other mammal this might be cause for concern but the otter revelled in the moment and dove to the bottom of the pond propelled by its large webbed hind feet. With his forelegs tucked into his body he sped around the pond in the dim light filtering through the ice. He poked at a sunken log but roused no

inhabitants and then spied a small crayfish that he easily caught. He carried it to the hole he had made, emerged and ate his snack on the bank.

That night a southwest wind arose. It coursed over the pond pushing the honeycombed ice that finally gave way. In less than an hour the pond had opened and when the warm sun rose the following morning it was gone. For a while the ravens could hear the ice crystals rattling against one another in an almost inaudible musical chime and soon this too disappeared. Water lapped against the shore and warmed.

photo Phil Burke

Soon it reached the magic temperature of approximately five degrees Celsius and the mud stirred. Ten painted turtles emerged from bottom of the pond where they had spent the winter. They swam to the surface, ate and then crawled onto a floating log to sun. Their emergence was soon followed by the emergence of the young snapping turtle and his brothers that had hatched in the latter part of August the year before.

Soon hunger struck the turtles and they ate their fill of Dobson fly larva that crawled along the bottom of the pond. They too sunned themselves but not in the manner of the painted turtles; they floated on the surface, with only their eyes and nostrils above water and they remained within the protection of the reeds. They were still only bite-sized reptiles.

A wood duck nested in a gaping wound in a large old aspen that leaned over the pond. Mom did all the work for like the mallards, the male had little interest in family life once mating was over. The cavity held a warm, downy nest with twelve eggs that would hatch in about four-and-a-half weeks. This family was lucky because the ducklings would land on the shore of the pond when they made their big leap into life. The ducklings' trip from the nesting tree to water is always perilous for this species.

Photo Phil Burke

Each day, and even each hour, witnessed the emergence of life as if the story of creation was being re-enacted in the pond. Marine plant life peaked through the sand and mud of the pond floor, pulled toward the sunlight that filtered through the water. Phytoplankton exploded into life and zooplankton followed,

feeding on the former and preying on other forms of zooplankton. And so the food chain began. Frogs, toads and salamanders emerged from their muddy hibernacula and collected at the pond to sing their love songs and mate and lay masses of eggs. While many of these eggs disappeared down the gullets of carnivores, enough survived to hatch into tadpoles.

Food was so abundant the young snapper and his brothers were never hungry. It followed the habits of its ancient ancestors and lay in the mud with only eyes showing so it could ambush careless prey swimming by. What was too large to consume whole was first torn apart with sharp claws. Snapping turtles are by nature omnivorous opportunists that will eat plants, live prey or, even more inviting, carrion.

Next week we continue our journey through the month of May at the pond.