

BOREAL BITS

PHIL BURKE



THE SNAPPER – PART 3

“Despite the fact we’ve got big books and big schools, we don’t know half of what goes on out there. Maybe we need more learners visiting woods and lakes, meadows and marshes.” A.C. Woltz

By the third week in May, the little snapper was a healthy but small specimen. It would grow about 2.5 cm a year until it reached sexual maturity at 5 to 7 years. After this the growth would slow to about 1.5 cm per year. The young snapper’s mother was well within the normal range of snapper size with a shell (carapace) length of 28 cm and a weight of 12 kg. Its father was a magnificent specimen who was at least double the size of the female. With the ridges of high scales on the tail and the ridges on the carapace, the snapper looks prehistoric indeed

The young snapper kept to the grassy areas of the pond where food was abundant and safety assured. Here he spent his days in the water basking in the sun by floating on the surface. Occasionally he would crawl onto a rock or shore to sun like its painted turtle cousins. But the grassy, reedy areas along the south shore of the pond did not always guarantee safety. A blue heron,

standing statue-silent spied the young snapper and was about to strike when a pregnant doe in need of a drink of water stepped from the trees and down the slope to the pond. The heron had seen deer all her life and did not equate the beast with danger yet it was too close for comfort so the huge bird squawked and flew off. The disturbance caused the little snapper to submerge and come to rest beside a rock. The deer walked the shoreline lapping the water and its hoof landed so close to the snapper it pushed the young reptile aside. A centimetre closer and the snapper would have been crushed.



photo Phil Burke

In the pine tree, the raven chicks were about to fledge. The four eggs had hatched over a month ago and now the nestlings were standing on the nest and even venturing onto branches of the jack pine that held the stick nest. On this particular day the nestlings called their parents to feed them but the parents didn't hear them. As the chicks aged the adults flew further afield secure in the knowledge that the chicks' size would protect them from marauders. Three hours to the minute after sunrise one of the chicks spread its wings and a gust of wind carried it into the air. The wind passed and the bird settled onto the nest again. Another strong gust and again the bird rose. With wings outspread,

it rose again and with wings tucked close to its body, it settled onto the stick nest. Then it stepped from the nest into the air. It was flying! Its world had suddenly become four-dimensional. By sundown, the fourth chick had left the nest. They wouldn't return to the structure that had been their home for all these weeks but they would remain in the territory learning the ways of forging from their parents.



Photo Phil Burke

The next morning found the raven family on the sandy shore of the pond where the painted turtles often sunned themselves. The fledglings watched with interest as their parents pulled worms from the sand and began searching themselves. The father of the family flew to the reedy south shore of the pond. A young snapping turtle was foraging in the early morning light when the female raven spotted it. The bird waited and then struck with a practiced bill. The turtle was too big to swallow so she carried it to the sandy shore, placed her foot upon it and picked the shell clean. A fledgling raven begged and pleaded for a share but its mother ignored it. After all, it was time for the young bird to learn to hunt on its own. A wood frog paddled to shore and the mother abandoned the empty shell and dashed forward. The fledgling pecked at the discarded shell and strutted on stiff legs over to its mother who turned her back and swallowed the frog. The young raven surveyed the shoreline, pecked at a dragonfly nymph but missed; accuracy was something that would come in time. An hour later a mink took the snapping turtle's remaining sibling from its

hiding place beneath the sandy mud of the pond and carried it to shore to eat it.

As the sun set the lone survivor of the clutch of snapping turtle eggs swam among the reeds feeding on mosquito larvae, oblivious to the fact that life was so precarious. In the snapper's world, adulthood was a rare prize.

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