

BOREAL BITS

PHIL BURKE



THE SNAPPER – PART 4

“Each moment of the year has its own beauty . . . a picture which was never before and shall never be seen again.” Ralph Waldo Emerson

If all life was a sound, the hue and din of late May would deafen the universe. Spring rains had come regularly ensuring a greening that the woods surrounding the pond hadn't witnessed in years. The snapping turtle could not know that he was one of millions of species living within the general area of the pond. Life crawled beneath rocks, through standing and downed timber, within the algae in the pond. It swam in the river and twirled, jerked, paddled, glided. It slithered and twisted through the primordial soup that was the pond. By now the forest was green and the meadow grasses had finally overtaken last fall's dead.

A riot of colour splashed the landscape. The pines released clouds of yellow pollen that drifted on the slightest breeze. A pin cherry tree had exploded into blossom giving it the appearance of a huge snow-covered shrub. This tree and one other had taken root a decade ago when a robin had carried seeds in its gut

from a few kilometres away. Since that time hundreds of birds had carried fruit from this particular tree and deposited seeds elsewhere. Some landed in fertile areas but of those that sprouted, few survived.



Photo Phil Burke

There had been another pin cherry tree that had grown beside this one. It too had grown healthy and year after year produced a large crop of fruit. But five years ago a black bear, ever hungry and ever the opportunist, had raided the harvest, pulling down the treetop so it could feast. The tree trunk broke near the base where it had been weakened by a boring insect. The destruction of the second tree removed competition for light and space and the remaining tree grew large and full.

The rains ensured that the sphagnum mosses grew light and fluffy, not brittle like they would become when the July drought hit. A deer and her newborn fawn walked across the rocky outcropping above the ravine and the water from last night's rain gushed from the porous mosses. Where there was sufficient sun, wild berries blossomed; raspberry, strawberry, goose berries, June berries,

bunchberries and blueberries. Nearby, blue flag, a wild iris, stood straight and tall inviting insects to its delicate and short-lived flowers.

A caterpillar that had been feeding on the birch that overhung the pond lost its grip and fell into the water. It bobbed to the surface and began arching its body in an attempt to move on this strange surface. The caterpillar was the larva of the forest tent caterpillar, the species that in eight years would ravage the forest. In its three-year reign of mass destruction, it would denude vast expanses of deciduous forests as tonnes of foliage passed through the gut of the huge biomass of caterpillars. This would create the appearance of autumn in May and June, months when the forests should have been at their greenest. Leaves would regrow but only to half the normal size. However this particular caterpillar was already doomed for it landed near the young snapper and was captured by the turtle's beak-like jaws. The caterpillar fought in vain but the turtle submerged, and in the way of its species, ripped its prey apart with its sharp claws.



The young turtle could only hear noise, not the particular forest sounds that identified the season when bird songs were at their peak. It had ignored the rapping of the pair of pileated woodpeckers as they hollowed a nest in the huge aspen nearby. It ignored the early morning song of the robin as it vied for their attention of the females, and the winsome call of the white-throated sparrow. It ignored the dizzying array of calls from the warblers as the males staked their territory and advertised for mates. All these calls blended together into a montage of forest noise punctuated by the harsh calls of the fledgling ravens craving the attention of their parents, the mewling and bickering of gulls, the thrum of hummingbird wings as they visited the wildflowers, the chitter of eagles soaring high on fast rising thermals, the distant whistling call of the osprey as she called for dinner delivery by her mate, the chorus of frogs and toads, the squawk of cormorants, the gronk of great blue herons and the rarely-

heard guttural tones of the pelicans. The young turtle seemed to hear only those sounds that pertained to his survival, but even most of these translated into vibrations that coursed through the turtle's watery world; the splash of a playful otter, the slight disturbance caused by the racoon family, the landing of a gull. The turtle was very vulnerable and would be for a few years yet. However, his species' survival instincts had proven successful since dinosaur times.

May came to an end and as a late sun finally succumbed to the pull of the western horizon, the turtle prepared for an evening of foraging.