

BOREAL BITS

PHIL BURKE



JUNE TALES – Part 4

*‘Live in each season as it passes; breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit.’
-Henry David Thoreau*

It is with great sadness that we prepare to bid farewell to June. Now the push for procreation comes as the plants have established themselves and are ready to produce offspring. The dandelions did this more than a month ago and since then other plants have joined them in seed production. In the bush, club moss is clubbing, that is, the plants are developing heads that will produce spores to ensure the species lives on. Late June definitely has its charms. Last year June and Tom called at 10:30 one evening to invite me to come and see the light show the fireflies were producing on the pipeline behind their house. Thousands of blinking lights gave an ethereal spirit to the night. Fireflies are more abundant now than at any other time. The male of the species flies through the night sky flashing his love code that is answered by the females on the plants below. Fireflies (or lightning bugs as they are sometimes called) flash when oxygen that is breathed in through the abdominal tracheae, combines with a substance called luciferin in

combination with a special enzyme. This reaction produces a very efficient light, with almost no energy lost as heat. The larvae of fireflies are active, ground-dwelling predators, whereas the adults eat plants or nothing at all. Check your compost bin in early summer for 'glowworms.'



Photo Phil Burke

With all the young animal life, the predators have easy pickings. More than a few times I observed an eagle flying over a crowded heron colony while excited and noisy adult herons refused to budge. (A biologist determined that eagles had a significant impact on heron colony survival rates in the Queen Charlotte Islands.) Diane Lapworth reported that while her family was boating on Lake of the Woods, they witnessed an eagle chase a duck off a nest and snatch a duckling. With so many predatory mouths to feed, most female ducks are forced to lay large clutches.

This is the month of the dragonfly, the friend to anyone who has ever stepped into a late spring or summer woods. On June 11 one year I happened across a lake on precisely the day when the dragonfly nymphs were metamorphosing into adults. Most likely this event was occurring

through the area. All dragonflies begin as predatory underwater creatures, the bane of insects, tadpoles and small fish. As an adult it becomes a predator of the air seeking such nasties as midges, deer flies, horse flies, mosquitoes and blackflies. I have had a few of these 'pets' accompany me on walks through mosquito-ridden forest paths snatching prey from the air and returning to perch on my shoulder. I have sat on the shore of the pond and watched with interest as a dragonfly used a nearby twig as a favourite perch, returning to it after catching dinner on the fly and even chasing other dragonflies from its territory. Ontario boasts a total of 153 species of dragonflies and closely related damselflies.



Photo Phil Burke

We will end our discussion of June with a tale taken from the big city. Jim and Sondra Gilbert were in Winnipeg and were traveling down St. James Road, a very busy city street, when they stopped for a mother mallard and a dozen very young ducklings that were crossing the street from east to west. When they reached the curb, mom had no trouble mounting it, but it was too high for the ducklings who hooked their little bills onto the sidewalk to help give them a boost to the higher level. It was all in vain though; the birds were too small. Jim pulled over, put on

his four-way flashers and helped the little ones onto the sidewalk. He was unable to see the end of the story but assumed the mallard family traveled to the west side of the strip mall where there was a stretch of disused rail lines.

And so, as the long summer evening glows red in the northwestern sky bidding farewell to one of the most wildlife-active months of the year, we look forward to July.