

BOREAL BITS

PHIL BURKE



THE AUGUST NATURE QUIZ

This summer's nature quiz is taking the form of a story fraught with error. Your job is to separate fact from fiction.

She was not happy that her holiday was at an end and that her life in the big city would resume within a few days. Her two-week vacation in the wilderness of Kenora was coming to an end and she was not pleased to be leaving the peace, quiet and the wildlife. How she envied those who lived here year round.

She stopped when she saw the chipmunk climbing onto the deck and she hurried to retrieve some peanuts from the cabin. The chipmunk must have told others about the bounty because this time three others appeared and although not as tame as the first one, they were anxious for peanuts as well. She couldn't blame them because the only large nuts she had seen in the wild were the large acorns growing on the bur oak tree beside the cabin.

When the chipmunks left, three red squirrels showed up. These three same

animals had been feeding on the patch of lawn at the front of the cabin since she arrived. Although they were never as friendly as the chipmunks, she enjoyed watching them pick up the peanuts in their little paws and settle into a sitting position to eat their prizes. In three months they would be hibernating so they would have to pack on a lot of fat to prepare themselves. She threw them more peanuts.



S. Lockhart

Two bald eagles, an adult and a juvenile, had flown over the lake the other day, their white heads and tails glistening against the deep blue of the summer sky. She watched them fishing together and was fascinated at the speed the mighty birds hit the water, actually disappearing from sight before emerging with a giant fish in their talons.

A weasel had come onto the deck the first day she arrived. The cat-sized animal had chewed a hole in the shed wall and had its den there. Sometimes when she walked by the shed she could hear it scratching in the walls.

She had found an osprey nest with four chicks in a thick spruce when she first arrived and now the young had nicely fledged. She marveled how clever the birds were at disguising their nest. The calls of the osprey were rather pleasant and she looked forward to the morning song they offered. One of the young

osprey chicks was reluctant to leave the nest and she saw the parent gently guide the chick, one on either side, as it left the nest for its first solo flight. Its larger sibling called excitedly as they circled the nest.

When the black bears came to the cabin, she had prepared herself well. She had always kept her garbage in a sturdy cans outdoors until it was time to bury it. The bears obviously weren't after the garbage; perhaps they were just passing through. They had eaten all spring and summer and were now large and fat. If winter came tomorrow they would be well prepared to hibernate. There were two large bears and two that looked half the size; obviously parents and this year's twin cubs. She was able to photograph them before they went on their way. Her friends back at the office would never believe her wildlife encounters without photographic proof.

End of story and now for the concerns.



(Wm. Burke)

The story is rife with error. Chipmunks do not 'tell' or communicate to other chipmunks where food is although it is possible the little rodents keep an eye on one another to see where the wealth is. The burr oak, common to our area, grows very small acorns, a favourite of wildlife. At this time of year chipmunks are storing food in pantries for the big cold. Red squirrels can never tolerate the presence of another adult and after the kids reach a few months of age they are

kicked out too. The 'squirrels on the lawn' is a behaviour best seen in the larger grey squirrel. Red squirrels never pick up food with their paws; they use their teeth and take the food into their paws from their teeth. Also, red squirrels are active all winter; they don't hibernate. Bald eagles do not develop the white head and tail of their mating plumage until about the fifth year. The young lady actually saw an adult male and female with the female always being the larger of the pair. Eagles do not normally dive into the water but rather snatch their prizes from the surface of the water. The osprey is the feet-first diver.

A weasel, even a large one, is much smaller than a cat. In fact, weasels will enter the tunnels of mice to clean out the inhabitants. What they lack in size they make up in ferocity. Also, weasels don't chew holes in wood although they have been known to hang around cabins, possibly catching the rodents that are attracted to such structures.

Ospreys build their nests out in the open on top of snags and at the very top of trees. Their stick nests are in the open and are easily seen. Ospreys normally have two chicks and sometimes three. Parents birds do not assist their young in flying, an activity that comes as normally to chicks as upright walking does to human babies. The call of the osprey, a harsh whistle, is hardly melodious.



Photo – K. Chambers

In August, black bears are into the eating drive that will consume them until

hibernation begins in November. Bears will travel in family groups consisting of mom and one, to three cubs. Daddy bears have a tendency to kill cubs and mom bear would never let a male get close to her young. In their second spring she drives her cubs away as she becomes more interested in Mr. Bear. The cottager had better do something with her garbage rather than storing it in a garbage can outside or burying it. Bears have great noses and since they consider trash a delicacy, neither a garbage can nor a hole in the ground will deter them.

May fond memories of the summer season haunt your every waking hour until it returns.

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REASONS TO LOVE SUMMER

'When summer days roll on in ecstatic love of life, I am humbled by its greatness and unassuming beauty.' E.B. Philips

Given the vagaries of our weather, summer is the season to love. As I perused past nature journals, I noticed more than a few entries that cause me to step back and marvel at just how wonderful the season is.

Summer usually means warm and possibly hot, no jackets-coats-earmuffs-boots-mitts-or scarves weather. Despite the baring of flesh and consequent attacks by mosquitoes and black flies, we love the opportunity to go about burdened by little clothing and, in the event of biters on the air, a liberal dose of insect repellent. Of course, the warmth follows the increase in daylight. At the end of the second week in July, the night sky at 10 pm provides enough light to read a newspaper by. Even then, the sky stays light in the direction of the land of the midnight sun. Early dawns and late evenings are the stuff of summer.

Summer skies are different from those of other seasons. Huge cumulus, popcorn clouds often dot the summer sky that can be the deepest blue at this time of year. The dust and degree of moisture determines the quality of blue we view but this scientific explanation takes away some of the magic that is a summer day.

In an article written by a journalist transplanted from Southern California to New York State, she begins by stating that she is thrilled to be living in an area that has real seasons. Well, we in this corner of Ontario have real seasons and during the early summer weather we can be guaranteed a lush drape of green that shades us, shelters us, comforts us and thrills us. One of my favourite deciduous trees is the quaking or trembling aspen that provides a background 'hush' as the leaves rattle in the summer breezes. It is because of these trees that when I was a very small child beginning to try to figure out the world, I was convinced that trees created wind.



(P. Burke)

Then there is the early summer riot of wildflower cover. As I write this article the ox-eye daisies are in bloom bobbing their white heads in the fields and roadsides. After months of dry, grey-brown lawns, I find I welcome the brilliant sunshine of dandelion blossoms, but after they succumb to time, other

wild flowers march through late spring, summer and fall. It ends with the last stragglers, the gentle blossoms of pearly everlasting that are white in bloom but turn light grey when they go to seed. It seems as if this wildflower is the one that welcomes winter... even the mention of that word makes me shudder.

One of the joys of summer is the rain shower when water falls in warm torrents and runs down the streets and hillsides. A few summers ago I watched out a picture window as a young girl, fully clothed in summer garb, spread her arms and danced for five minutes in the midst of a warm downpour. The price of this activity was simply wet clothing, the rewards memorable for her and for me.



(P. Burke)

So far we haven't mentioned the wildlife. The arrival of the migrants is compelling, the temporary burst of bird song signals the new generation, the deer trade in their old grey winter coats for the reddish-brown coats of summer, the ravens depart (possibly likely to get away from the noisy crows,) the amphibians sing to the night, the young of eagle and osprey grow rapidly in their nests saluting with their wings the air that is their future, young birds join their parents for summer learning activities, spotted fawns follow their moms, bear cubs—ranking at the top of the scale of most cute little ones— romp after

their large and serious moms, dad deer's antlers grow at an alarming pace, skunks decorate our lawns with holes in search of grubs, humming birds thrum to sugar-water feeders, gardeners capture nature in their gardens, chipmunks flit across the roads with their tails held high, and strange birds put in an occasional appearance causing us to scramble for the birding guides before we forget what they looked like.

A pair of pileated woodpeckers spends hours working on a half-metre stump in the backyard making us glad we didn't cut it off at ground level. They are after carpenter ants that chose the stump as a residence—carpenter ants don't eat the wood, they use it to excavate tunnels and chambers. They too are part of summer as are the yellow-shafted flicker and the American toad that delight in ant cuisine.

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DRAGONS THAT FLY

*'I was born to catch dragons in their dens,
And pick flowers,
To tell tales and laugh away the morning,
To drift and dream like a lazy stream,
And walk barefoot across sunshine days.'* James Kavanaugh

Anyone visiting or resident in the area knows that this is a good year for mosquitoes if we consider the mosquitoes view point. Add to that no-see-ums whose bite is as painful as that as a horsefly, along with blackflies and sometimes it's just not a safe place for soft-skinned humans to be. Nor it is safe or comfortable for furred residents. A deer and her fawn wandered into our yard and spent more time scratching and twitching than they did grazing. The fawn actually leaped into the air a few times in a desperate attempt to flee the misery that was being inflicted upon it by biting insects. We commiserated with the unfortunate little creature.

Those of us who enjoy getting outdoors in bug weather learn to put up with them; the alternative is to remain indoors and we are forced to do that more than enough during other seasons. The secret is DEET, the chemical that confuses biters so much

they don't really know how to handle the situation. I have tried other insect repellents but for my money and comfort, there's nothing like DEET. In fact a report in the New England Journal of Medicine concluded that, 'Currently available non-DEET repellents do not provide protection for durations similar to those of DEET-based repellents and cannot be relied on to provide prolonged protection in environments where mosquito-borne diseases are a substantial threat.'



Photo P. Burke

Those among us who abhor applying chemicals to our bodies, might consider some of nature's true alternatives: nighthawks, bats and dragonflies. It is the latter that have provided me with a personal bodyguard as I trooped through mosquito-infested forest paths. In fact, in one instance the dragonfly used my shoulder as a perch, ever on the watch for mosquitoes that I scared up along the trail. That particular insect stayed with me for ten minutes, zipping off now and again for a mosquito snack, but always returning to its shoulder perch.

Dragonflies are popular in our neck of the woods simply because they are confirmed insectivores. Using their legs like a basket they capture mosquitoes and black flies and munch on them while in flight. They will also take butterflies, moths, caterpillars, grasshoppers; in fact, no insect is safe. Another walk through a mosquito-infested section of bush took me to a lakeshore where a hoard of mosquitoes decided I was fair game. Some sought those few square centimetres of flesh not protected by insect repellent and the rest flew around me in a cloud. Then help arrived in the form of two dragonflies. One snatched a mosquito off my arm as I watched and the other buzzed the cloud. Most of the mosquitoes departed but my friendly escort remained with me for a few minutes longer.

During the second week in June I drove to a lake north of town with the intent of circumnavigating it for the first time in many years. As I parked the car and removed the canoe, I noticed a swarm of a few hundred dragonflies plying the air at treetop level. "Good," I thought. As with all my canoe trips, I stick as close to the shore as possible because this is where the action is. A rock emerging from the water was covered with forty dragonfly nymphs. Also on that rock were two dull, tan coloured dragonflies that had just completed their final molt. Their wings were still folded in little packages on their shoulders.



(P. Burke)

From then on I was attuned to the dragonfly molt and saw literally thousands of the ugly little nymphs pulling themselves onto dry land (or weeds, or grass, or trees) to effect the final molt. Once free of the water, they lock their feet on an object, then bend, twist and hunch over until the skin splits just behind their heads. The adult insects emerge after what must be a very exhausting struggle lasting a few minutes to ten or more. Then they sit, waiting until the sun and the wind dry their wings. Finally they fly off to join their comrades in the never-ending search for insects. The dragonfly nymph is a miracle worker because it can pack an adult insect into its wingless body. The adult emerges three times longer than the nymph and sports a beautiful set of wings.

These dragonflies began life a year ago when eggs were deposited on the surface of the water, or into slits cut into the stalks of aquatic weeds. After a few days a nymph hatches that is so voracious that it is nicknamed the tiger of the pond. The more it eats the more it grows, and the more it grows the more it molts. The larger it gets, the larger the prey it seeks. Tadpoles, fish fry and minnows often fall prey to this predator along with countless mosquito larvae and other aquatic insects. It overwinters in the pond litter and on a fine day in late spring, an alarm clock goes off telling the nymph it is time.

It was my fortune to arrive at this lake just as the alarm clock sounded.

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JOHN'S SKUNK

'Never get into a spraying match with a skunk.' Mark Hatfield

The call came early in the morning in late June. “Something dug up my lawn last night. What could it be? Is your lawn okay?” I told him I would check and get back to him although right off the bat I smelled a skunk. In fact Pat and I had noticed skunk odor lingering on the air the night before.

In this area we are no strangers to the striped skunk whose Latin name, *Mephitis mephitis*, translates as ‘a noxious exhalation,’ and there are few among us who won’t agree with this descriptor. Our old dog found this out a few times and being a terrier, he is one of the dogs that just won’t heed the black and white danger sign. Henceforth, whenever we smell a skunk we take Norm out on a leash at night.

Our lawn was untouched but when I checked out John’s lawn, I was surprised at the damage. Sod was upturned and soil was scattered about in at least two-dozen different spots on his otherwise nicely groomed lawn. The conical holes ranged between 3-10 cm (1 –5 in) deep and up to

half as wide. We have had skunk damage in the grassy areas of our property but never to the extent experienced by neighbour John. Repair would involve raking the soil into the holes, and replacing the sod.

Skunks are especially fond of insects. In spring and fall the animals often dig into soil in search of grubs or other larvae. June beetle larvae can be a substantial mouthful. Anyone who has kept bees in this area knows that skunks can destroy hives to satiate their taste for bees or their larvae. In addition to insects, skunks will eat mice, other rodents, amphibians, small reptile, carrion, fruits, vegetables, ground-nesting hatchlings and eggs. There is nothing quite like an omnivore to assure success in the wild.



(We have no photos of skunks and therefore proudly present this instead. P Burke)

A skunk shoots its musk by compressing the two glands on either side of its anus causing a misty stream to shoot forth with surprising accuracy within 3 metres. The spotted skunk, a smaller version of our striped skunk, will spray an aggressor by standing on its front feet facing its target with its back arched so that the glands face forward. The striped

skunk will give a warning by stamping its feet with tail raised—in most cases—and if this doesn't deter the real or perceived threat, it will twist its body into a u-shape with nose and tail facing the same direction and let fly. Contrary to popular myth, skunks do not spray urine; also they do not flick the foul-smelling musk with their tails.

It is rare that skunks wander in broad daylight. They are nocturnal animals, the dampness and darkness of night serving them well as they aimlessly search for food. Fortunately, the white stripe is present and has saved us many a time from getting too close (i.e. within spray range) during warm summer evening walks.



(Skunk lunch – a June Bug larva. Photo Wm. Burke)

Our dog Norm is a pretty smart animal except when it comes to skunks. It may be the terrier in him but he just won't learn that attacking the black and white critters is not necessarily a good idea. As his vet said, "Some dogs just won't learn." One 'skunking' that is more memorable than the others occurred during one late summer evening when Norm went into his pen for his regular duties. His pen is fenced and located

partially under the deck where we keep boards and other important items. Norm trotted down his dog stairs and immediately started barking. This was followed by the stench of skunk. I called him and he ran up the stairs at which time I closed the trapdoor to his stairway. He was still very agitated and disappointed he couldn't go down again. Of course he had been skunked but in all fairness he was in his own pen. I decided to investigate and with Norm on a leash went into the pen through the ground level door. Norm pulled to a pile of timber and started whining and digging. I tied him up outside and carefully removed a few boards to reveal an absolutely terrified half-grown skunk staring back at me. I slowly backed away and left the gate to the pen open. In the morning it was gone. Norm and the skunk were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Skunks have more than Norm to worry about. Some great horned owl nests can be located by following the stench of skunk odor because it takes more than a spray to discourage those night predators. Also, on a recent trip along a Northwestern Ontario highway we were surprised to see a red fox trotting proudly across the road carrying a small skunk in its jaws. It seems that the chemical protection, though good, is not infallible.

As for John's skunk, the secret to getting rid of the skunk is to get rid of the insects that provide the skunk with a reason for digging. The situation is akin to the bear problem; feed them and they will return. They were obviously being fed or they wouldn't have wasted the energy digging holes. Another solution is to fence the lawn to keep out the perpetrator or, in that John mentioned this is the first time in almost twenty years that he has experienced the problem, he can wait it out

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THE EAGLE AND THE OSPREY

“You can observe a lot just by watching.” Yogi Berra

Some times the situation is such that being in the right place at the right time is very easy. Take the jobs Ray Hanstead, Dave Nachuk and Gord St. Dennis have at the sewage treatment plant located on the Winnipeg River across from Old Fort Island. For two men who love observing nature at her best, you can't beat this location. Not three hundred metres from the facility gate is an osprey nest and across from the plant on Old Fort Island is an eagle nest, a relatively new structure established last year. As of this writing, a healthy eaglet is maturing on the nest. This team of observers often informs me of interesting events occurring near their place of work, but nothing prepared me for the story Ray and Gord related regarding an incident that took place on May 27, one of the few warm, bright dry days we experienced during the spring. On this date at about 11 a.m., they heard a commotion caused by incessant cawing of crows near the gate of the treatment facility. It was enough to cause them to investigate. They saw four crows engaged in a shouting-flying match with a mature bald eagle. As they approached the gate they realized that another eagle was standing on the back of an osprey that lay face down with

wings spread on the ground. The airborne eagle and crows fled the scene but not the other two birds. As the men watched, they twice observed the eagle and osprey rise slightly into the air and then slam back to the ground. Whether this was caused by the action of the eagle or the efforts of the osprey is not clear.

Realizing that the osprey was in serious trouble they ran toward the birds, an action that caused the eagle to flee. Gord went to the office to call the Ministry and a message was relayed to wildlife technician Lil Anderson, the name behind the local wildlife rehabilitation facility.



Ray had experienced a wounded eagle once before and found that covering its head would quiet it. He tried this with the osprey but the bird glared at him in such a way he figured he would pass on that idea. As Ray and Gord watched, the osprey panted for breath. After about ten minutes it had regained enough strength to pull in its wings and perch on the ground. Still panting heavily it waited another ten minutes before it flew off very low to the ground, landing in a large pine tree a few hundred metres down the road. There it remained against the trunk for the rest of the day and all of the next day, Friday. It was there when Lil Anderson arrived and I'm sure she was thankful that it had recovered enough to fly off. On Saturday morning when Ray arrived for work,

the osprey was gone. He checked around the base of the tree but there was no sign of the bird. To muddy the story further, Ray and Gord saw three adult ospreys on that day.

Bald eagles are great robbers of fish from ospreys. The lucky observer has seen eagles harass ospreys to the extent that the smaller bird drops its catch that is then caught by the attacking eagle before it hits the water. Ben Franklin had this to say, "I wish that the bald eagle had not been chosen as the representative of our country (U.S.A.), he is a bird of bad moral character, he does not get his living honestly, you may have seen him perched on some dead tree, where, too lazy to fish for himself, he watches the labor of the fishing-hawk, and when that diligent bird has at length taken a fish, and is bearing it to its nest for the support of his mate and young ones, the bald eagle pursues him and takes it from him..." Eagle attacks on the osprey itself are not nearly as common.



From Ray's description of the osprey, it was a male. Females do the incubating and brooding while the male catches fish for all of them and with the male gone, survival of the clutch would be in great jeopardy.

Then there was the third adult osprey that muddied the story. It is possible that this was an unattached bird that was passing by. Although ospreys sometimes nest in close proximity to other ospreys, no other nests have been located. Within a square half-kilometre, this area of the Winnipeg River is home to three active bald eagle nests and an osprey nest. It is a credit to the environment that it can produce enough fish to feed the adults and young from these four nests because although eagles will feed off carrion and other food sources (ducks, gulls, etc) the majority of their diet is fish.

And when push comes to shove in a dispute between the two birds, the larger, heavier and more aggressive eagle will win every time.

BOREAL BITS

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THE DOE AND THE DOG

'Amusement to an observing mind is study.' Benjamin Disraeli

On June 6, Arlene and Cuyler Cotton of Muriel Lake observed an incident that is rarely seen in our area. At about three in the afternoon under a nicely sunny sky—itsself a rarity for early June—a whitetail doe chased a Labrador-size dog around their yard, the deer bent on the dog's destruction as much as the dog was bent on its own survival.

The deer was no stranger to the Cottons. It was part of a small herd of whitetails that frequented the area for much of the winter. The hierarchy of the herd was well defined with a large buck dominating all, a large older female next in line, followed by a younger female. Yearling fawns occupied the lower positions. We have observed this type of social structure over the years and have despaired at the hard life of the fawns that have no mother to stick up for them.

Deer are hardly the gentle types portrayed in Disney's Bambi. A Sioux Narrows resident was feeding deer during the "Feed the Deer Campaign" when heavy

snows threatened the herds in the late 1990's. She was absolutely appalled when an older doe lifted onto its back feet and struck a fawn so powerfully that it killed the young deer.



(P Burke)

The doe in the Cotton story was number three in the hierarchy of the local herd. Arlene suggests that it may be the daughter of the older doe who was in the number two position. Number Three became quite tame over the winter and would take apples from the hands of the Cottons and was therefore very identifiable.

On this day in early June the neighbourhood dog, Marilyn—so nicknamed because of her blond hair and blue eyes—came over for a visit at the same time Number Three happened on the scene. It is highly likely that the two had met before but it seems that the larger the herd the easier it is to spook them; one becomes fidgety and the others follow suit. This time, however, the aggressive nature of Number Three rose to the surface when it saw its mortal enemy, a member of the canine family.

Wolves and deer have been around for millennia and it is the deer that have

been one of the staple foods of the carnivores. A young, sick, or old deer is no match for the combined jaws of members of a wolf pack and the response to the threat of canine attack is instinctive. As in most stressful situations, the response may be fight or flight and most of the time deer choose flight. Obviously, this time the deer chose the fight response.

For about thirty seconds the deer gave chase. The dog realized it had no chance against the hooves of this raging beast and beat a hasty retreat with the deer close behind. A deer can easily outdistance a dog but the dog had the advantage of agility and zigzagged its way across the yard at top speed. The only problem was that the deer kept up, its nose less than two tail lengths away from the frightened dog. The dog doubled back but still the deer kept pace. Finally the dog raced across the road toward a wooded area—and possibly home—with the enraged doe in close pursuit. Half an hour later the doe returned. The dog has since been seen, none the worse for wear. To this date there is no indication that the doe was protecting a fawn, that is, the doe has not been seen in the company of a fawn.



(P Burke)

An incident involving a deer attack on a family pooch was reported in the Eugene, Oregon press. The owner of the dog said the deer blindsided her and

her two dogs the moment they walked onto their deck in their fenced backyard. A wildlife specialist suggested that the doe was exhibiting its aggressive, dominant nature. If it weren't for the dog's owner beating the doe with a stick the dog would have succumbed. As it was the English setter suffered severe injury during the 45-second attack. In the same article, mention is made of a woman who was chased into her house by a deer. As the wildlife specialist stated, "It's a common scenario: Neighbours adopt deer, feed deer, deer loses fear of humans, deer attacks humans or pets," he said.

Wild animals are just that... wild

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AN AUGUST HIKE

'Nature and Books belong to the eyes that see them.' Emerson

Each spring and summer month has its charms, its surprises, its beauties. August is the month that most plant life matures and I am sure that it is during this month that the total biomass of the Boreal Forest peaks, that is, at a certain moment the total mass of life in the Boreal Forest ceases to increase. We know that September is lurking behind every tree, and behind every September day lurks frost and cold. The plants know this too and must prepare their progeny. Already we have seen the first wildflowers of the year come and go such as dandelion heads that bathed our lawns in the first yellow of the season. We have seen the white heads of ox-eye daisies bobbing in profusion in fields and roadways, the orange-red flowers of devil's paintbrush and most recently the yellow multi-flowered heads of tansies that will stay with us well into September.

During the third week in August I took a hike. My objective for the day was to walk to a marsh, a small part of which I could see through some trees south of

the bypass. I suspected it was a massive beaver pond or collection of beaver ponds and certainly worth the time to investigate. My usual tools were with me: binoculars, camera, magnifying glass (the eyes aren't what they used to be), and a small tape recorder to help me recall the minutia when it came time to writing up the days journey.



P Burke

The trip began at ten in the morning even though I knew that I would have a better chance of seeing more wildlife in the early morning or late evening. You have to visit the edges if you want to view wildlife, the edges dividing day and night, night and day, the edge of a river, a lake, a pond, the edge of a meadow or field, the edge between two seasons. The trail to the pond was non-existent

which means a fair amount of work but the day was neither insect ridden nor particularly hot. Underfoot the sphagnum moss crunched like cornflakes due to the fact that it hadn't rained in the last few weeks. The moss was hardly dead though; on the first rain, the moss will soak up the water like a sponge.

Finally I broke through the tree line and reached the marsh. It was dry underfoot and covered with tall grasses and sedges. One reference book describes the difference between sedges and grass by pointing out that sedges are triangular in cross section and thus 'sedges have edges'. The sedge meadow and marsh were once parts of a lake going through the process of becoming a forest. Sedges grow best in areas that are moist underfoot, and by continual growth and decay, soil is formed. As I looked out from the sedge meadow I saw cattails rimming the open water and beyond that a pond at least a hundred metres long and three-quarters as wide. With each passing decade the pond grows smaller as the plants continue their inexorable march into the water. Already some trees, particularly black spruce, were growing among the sedges.

Above me a vulture dipped and soared on the warming air currents. This one had a dark head, not the red head and neck of the turkey vulture. I made note of the bird and later learned that young turkey vultures have dark heads. Beyond the vulture two ravens were playing a game of aerial tag.



(P Burke)

As I approached the water, the ground became damper. A common resident of the pond, a redwing blackbird, flitted among the cattails as I approached. The water was considerably lower than it had been earlier in the season as evidenced by the beaver trails, about 30 cm (1 ft) wide and almost as deep. These trails leading to the pond give the beaver quick access to deeper water when needed but now that they were dry, they made for easier walking for me. Finally the terrain was becoming too damp and I looked for higher ground to get a better view of the pond. I fought my way through heavy vegetation to a rocky ridge and followed this to the end of the pond where the beaver dam was. The dam was a beautiful structure and represented countless hundreds of hours of work. A tree stood in the middle of the pond. It was long dead but the holes in the trunk indicated that possibly some of the nesting ducks (wood ducks or mergansers) had used it at some time. The small lake of water was being contained by the efforts of the beaver and if this dam let go, it wouldn't be long before plant life covered the bottom of the pond adding to the sedge meadow. Near the dam were some last year cattails, with their mousy looking seedpods. Rather than losing their fluff to the wind, these cattail fruits were held together by silky threads from insects specializing in such plants. I tore apart one of the mousy fruits and noticed dozens of small, soft beetles the size of black flies inhabiting the seed pods. As a perfect adaptation to their particular habitat, evolution had preferred a flattened shape to help them move through the seeds pods more easily.

When it came time to leave, rather than return the way I had come I chose a route over the rocky hill blanketed with a profusion of August wildflowers, fleabane, purple aster, pearly everlasting, and harebells among others. When I reached the top of the hill I realized that between me and the road was a hillside covered with thousands of shoulder-high Canada thistle in full seed. The thousands of plants were so dense they formed a blanket of beige seed heads. I chose to head straight through the field but afterwards wished I hadn't.

All in all, it was a very prickly experience, but like most nature hikes it was worth it. My only regret is that I never saw a beaver.

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THE BEAVER DAM

“Beauty is nature’s brag, and must be shown in courts, at feasts, and high solemnities, where most may wonder at the workmanship.” Milton (1608-1674)

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A few years ago, a beaver pond was created less than a half a kilometre from our house when a pair of beavers took advantage of a stream and a new highway construction to build a dam. Our national rodent, so prominently displayed on our nickel coin, created a dam that raised the water so dramatically it became a danger to human traffic. Eventually the rodents were trapped and the problem was solved. However, while the beavers were building the dam, there was an excellent opportunity for observers to learn how they went about it.



(P Burke)

Beavers are the subjects of certain myths. An early myth reported that beavers would pile sticks and mud on a family member who is lying on its back. While the prone rodent clutches onto the building materials, other members of the family will drag it to the work site, something akin to using another beaver as a wheelbarrow. Yet another myth stated that beavers loaded their broad tails with mud and hauled it to the work site. Also beavers do not ‘pat down’ and flatten the mud by slapping the work piece with their tails.

The ‘rebar’ in a beaver lodge or dam is in the form of sticks cut by the beavers. Often they will chew the bark off first—they don’t eat wood—and then will push the sticks in mud or entangle it among other sticks. Beavers will move

tonnes of mud. They push mud bound together by roots of grass, weeds and shrubs through the pond by holding it against their chest with their paws. Mud is the mortar of the dam and comes from the bottom of the pond and from beaver trails created to provide additional depth for easier and safer beaver travel. In some ponds they will clear the bottom of mud so thoroughly that some trees and shrubs will topple from lack of support.



P Burke

Once built, the dam needs continual upkeep and beavers may be seen in the late evening, night and morning working away to ensure sufficient maintenance is done. If the dam fails, the safety of the beaver family is compromised. Also the underwater entrances to the beaver lodge may be revealed.

This brings up the question of 'damless' beavers. There are some beavers that do not build a dam because there is nowhere to build one and if they did, it would in no way contribute to the depth of the water. These beavers usually build their lodges on banks or near the shore of rivers or lakes. Considering the time normal beaver put into dam maintenance it makes one wonder what these beavers do with all their spare time.

The beavers that caused the problem on the TransCanada Highway were most

likely busy rebuilding their dam minutes after the dam failure occurred on that early morning of July 13. Humans interested in discouraging a family of beavers quickly find that tearing out the dam is no way to control the problem because the beavers will repair it again and again. Years ago members of our local township council attempted to solve the beaver pond-alongside-the-highway problem by sending in a backhoe to remove the dam. This was done four or five times but on each occasion the beavers were at work before the backhoe drove away. The only permanent solution is to trap them.

Only in Canada, eh?

BOREAL BITS

PHIL BURKE



SUMMER NATURE QUIZ

This summer's nature quiz is taking the form of a story fraught with error. Your job is to separate fact from fiction.

She was not happy that her holiday was at an end and that her life in the big city would resume within a few days. Her two-week vacation in the wilderness of Kenora was coming to an end and she was not pleased to be leaving the peace, quiet and the wildlife. How she envied those who lived here year round.

She stopped when she saw the chipmunk climbing onto the deck and she hurried to retrieve some peanuts from the cabin. The chipmunk must have told others about the bounty because this time three others appeared and although not as tame as the first one, they were anxious for peanuts as well. She couldn't blame them because the only large nuts she had seen in the wild were the large acorns growing on the bur oak tree beside the cabin.



P Burke

When the chipmunks left, three red squirrels showed up. These three same animals had been feeding on the patch of lawn at the front of the cabin since she arrived. Although they were never as friendly as the chipmunks, she enjoyed watching them pick up the peanuts in their little paws and settle into a sitting position to eat their prizes. In three months they would be hibernating so they would have to pack on a lot of fat to prepare themselves. She threw them more peanuts.

Two bald eagles, an adult and a juvenile, had flown over the lake the other day, their white heads and tails glistening against the deep blue of the summer sky. She watched them fishing together and was fascinated at the speed the mighty birds hit the water, actually disappearing from sight before emerging with a giant fish in their talons.

A weasel had come onto the deck the first day she arrived. The cat-sized animal had chewed a hole in the shed wall and had its den there. Sometimes when she walked by the shed she could hear it scratching in the walls.



(G Rowe)

She had found an osprey nest with four chicks in a thick spruce when she first arrived and now the young had nicely fledged. She marveled how clever the birds were at disguising their nest. The calls of the osprey were rather pleasant and she looked forward to the morning song they offered. One of the young osprey chicks was reluctant to leave the nest and she saw the parent gently guide the chick, one on either side, as it left the nest for its first solo flight. Its larger sibling called excitedly as they circled the nest.

When the black bears came to the cabin, she had prepared herself well. She had always kept her garbage in a sturdy cans outdoors until it was time to bury it. The bears obviously weren't after the garbage; perhaps they were just passing through. They had eaten all spring and summer and were now large and fat. If winter came tomorrow they would be well prepared to hibernate. There were two large bears and two that looked half the size, obviously parents and this year's twin cubs. She was able to photograph them before they went on their way. Her friends back at the office would never believe her wildlife encounters without photographic proof.

End of story and now for the concerns.

The story is rife with error. Chipmunks do not 'tell' or communicate to other chipmunks where food is although it is possible the little rodents keep an eye on one another to see where the wealth is. The burr oak, common to our area, grows very small acorns, a favourite of wildlife. At this time of year chipmunks are storing food in pantries for the big cold. Red squirrels can never tolerate the presence of another adult and after the kids reach a few months of age they are kicked out too. The 'squirrels on the lawn' is a behaviour best seen in the larger grey squirrel. Red squirrels never pick up food with their paws; they use their

teeth and take the food into their paws from their teeth. Also, red squirrels are active all winter; they don't hibernate.



P Burke

Bald eagles do not develop the white head and tail of their mating plumage until about the fifth year. The young lady actually saw an adult male and female with the female always being the larger of the pair. Eagles do not normally dive into the water but rather snatch their prizes from the surface of the water. The osprey is the feet-first diver.

A weasel, even a large one, is much smaller than a cat. In fact, weasels will enter the tunnels of mice to clean out the inhabitants. What they lack in size they make up in ferocity. Also, weasels don't chew holes in wood although they have been known to hang around cabins, possibly catching the rodents that are attracted to such structures.

Ospreys build their nests out in the open on top of snags and at the very top of trees. Their stick nests are in the open and are easily seen. Ospreys normally have two chicks and sometimes three. Parents birds do not assist their young in flying, an activity that comes as normally to chicks as upright walking does to

human babies. The call of the osprey, a harsh whistle, is hardly melodious.

In August, black bears are into the eating drive that will consume them until hibernation begins in November. Bears will travel in family groups consisting of mom and one, to three cubs. Daddy bears have a tendency to kill cubs and mom bear would never let a male get close to her young. In their second spring she drives her cubs away as she becomes more interested in Mr. Bear. The cottager had better do something with her garbage rather than storing it in a garbage can outside or burying it. Bears have great noses and since they consider trash a delicacy, neither a garbage can nor a hole in the ground will deter them.

May fond memories of our beautiful summer sustain you until it comes again.

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