

# BOREAL BITS

PHIL BURKE



## 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.