

BOREAL BITS

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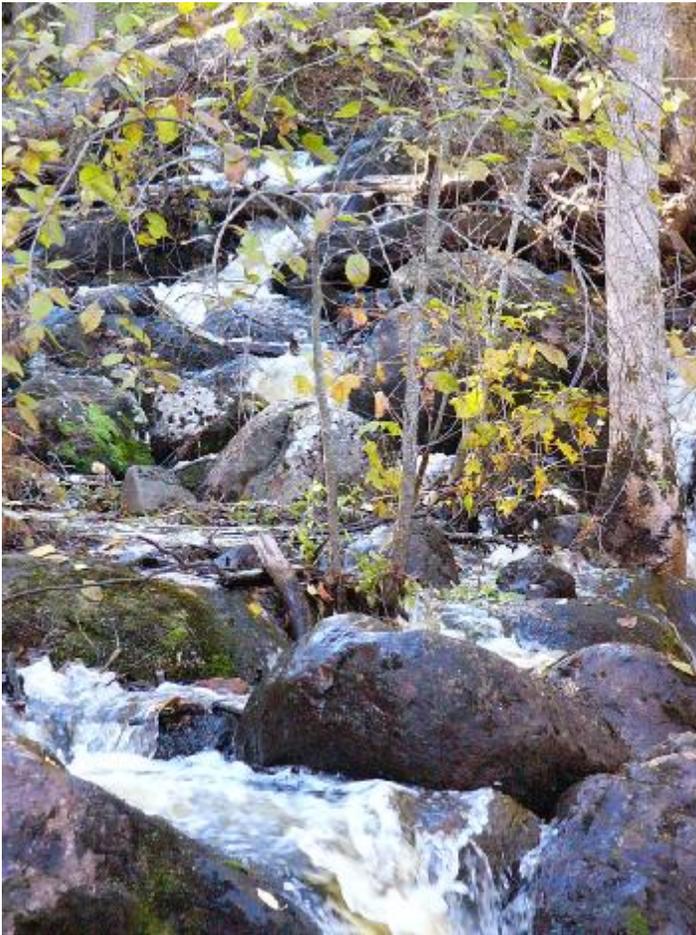
FAREWELL SEPTEMBER

'Observe constantly that all things take place by change, and accustom thyself to consider that the nature of the Universe loves nothing so much as to change the things which are, and to make new things like them.' Marcus Aurelius (121-180 A.D.)

September, a one time the seventh month of the year until Julius Caesar came along and decided to add July and August. September is a transition month; well, they are all transition months but September and October fit this description more than most. Considering what the month began like, it is considerable different now. In thirty days we have lost 1 hour, 46 minutes of sunlight. And remember those long lazy dawns and evenings of July? Well, you can forget them. The dark is arriving.

This planet of ours is nothing but a huge heat sink with an atmosphere that helps to retain heat. We have actually been receiving less heat from the sun since the June equinox but it takes the earth a while to catch up to the prevailing conditions. However, soon the heat gain is lost and each day more of our precious heat heads into space. It is particularly noticeable in late August and September when early morning mists become commonplace, and certainly in September when the thermometer dips down below the zero mark in spots leaving a frosty veil across lawns and a think skim of ice on puddles and shorelines.

The honking of the Canada goose is as much a sign of our fall as the red of sumac leaves and the gold of birch. These are tough birds and some may be seen in our area until the end of November. Some have successfully wintered in the open water of the Winnipeg River, but this was most likely prompted by injuries that temporarily disabled the birds. An end-of-September walk brought many rewards. Choose your route to include edges; the edges of water and land, the edges of meadow and forest (the pipeline and hydro right-of-ways provide excellent meadow habitat), the edges of pathways and rocky outcroppings.



While fall is evident, there are still considerable amounts of deciduous green. Much has already been painted by autumn's brush. It is interesting to note the patterns various species of trees use to change colour; some leaves will turn colour from the trunk outward, others from the top down, while still others change the colour of their leaves in a random pattern. Ash and birch have turned yellow already while the aspens are slower. A is beginning to turn yellow also. It is our only conifer (needle leafed tree) that sheds its needles.

A, kingfisher chattered from across a pond. A blue wing teal landed on the same pond but first touched the mirror-calm water surface with a wing tip. On the western shore near the rocky railway embankment, the

river a small flock seven crows foraged, examining every square centimeter of ground. Pecking here and there. A female common merganser fled from behind a railway bridge buttress into the middle of the river. There she remained stationary for ten or fifteen seconds which means she must have been paddling furiously to compensate for the swiftly flowing current. She then paddled about 30 metres away and appeared unable to fly. If this was the case, she was either injured or was experiencing a late molt.

There were very few acorns on the burr oaks. Earlier in the month I had run across a bear pulling branches so it could reach acorns. Undoubtedly bears are partially responsible for the dearth of fruit on these trees but squirrels, chipmunks and jays among others will eat them as well. A female and male ruffed grouse clucked their way down the path ahead of me before heading into the bush. I wouldn't have noticed them were it not for this chicken-like clucking.

A mosquito buzzed my ear. By swatting it I may have wiped out hundreds of next year's progeny because many adults winter in crevasses and beneath tree bark. Two painted turtles were sunning themselves on their favourite log, gaining the last rays before the big sleep. A juvenile eagle drifted over the pond, possibly one of the eaglets that fledged from one of the three eagle nests within a square-half kilometer in this area.



On this particular year we ran across a bear den dug by the bear into a sandy bank on Lake of the Woods. It was an amazingly large structure, a metre high and more than two metres in diameter. The bear left its claw marks on the interior walls. Obviously it was a den from a previous year because, as mentioned, bears are into an eating mode at this time of year. If they were to hibernate in late September, their fat reserves would never last them until food became available in the spring.

However, our world is shutting down, although it is busy, preparing itself for the big sleep.

(Photos – P. Burke)