

BOREAL BITS

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"I fear that I have not got much to say about Canada, not having seen much; what I got by going to Canada was a cold." Henry David Thoreau, Excursion to Canada, 1850.

It isn't one of my favourite months because like March and—too often—April, it is a 'tween' month, between the sometimes glory days of autumn and the white. On second thought it is my least favourite month, clothed in the discarded heaps of summer dress, naked and barren. We have been robbed of an hour's worth of daylight during the evenings and although it was pasted onto the mornings, the days are short and rapidly becoming shorter.

The air is pungent with the musk of decay as fungi and molds consume the fallen leaves and dying grasses in the mists of drenched days and damp nights. Nights become frosty as the heat (and very little of it this year) gradually escapes into space and the poor bedraggled sun cannot keep pace. Precipitation begins as snow, falls, and remains as snow building the layers that will last until spring when the sun once again wins the battle against winter.

Our wildlife is at a low. Deer are plentiful though and since the numbers of these ruminants has increased so dramatically, they are both coveted and cursed. The



new bag limit on whitetails should make a difference in the area but since shooting is not allowed within town limits, the local herds may be spared. Hence more garden disruption next spring.

Bears have not been reported as much as they have in past years when berry crops were abysmal failures. This year the only bears I have seen are at a local restaurant with an open trash container. In certain parts of the country this would not be allowed for the sake of local residents and the well being of bears. The winter birds are beginning to move in. Our resident squirrel did a fine job of harvesting pine cones and putting up fungi to dry before adding these to its storage areas. If mushrooms are still wet when the squirrel adds them to its cache, they can become rotten and maggot-ridden and as a result foul the remaining foodstuffs.

The chickadees and nuthatches are coming to the bear-proof hanging feeder—it's mounted so high the bear would need a ladder—and taking the seeds to hide them away. Whether they remember where they hide their treasures is questionable but if enough is hidden, the law of averages says they should find some sooner or later. Undoubtedly many smaller mammals and other birds are thankful for the stores of seeds these two hard-working species provide.



The great die-off has taken place but as of this writing there are still a few insects including blackflies and mosquitoes that are buzzing through the post-October days. Some of these will perish while others will find refuge, possibly under the bark of a tree and, fertilized, wait until spring to lay eggs and begin a new generation.

The great migration is long past and the big sleep is upon us. Amphibians have long since chosen hibernacula that will allow them to sleep away the cold months without danger of freezing. Bears, although they don't officially hibernate to the point of torpor, have already or will soon select den sites and will doze through the winter with their furnaces fueled by a great layer of fat. Deer have grown a special thick coat and provided their fat lasts and they find enough energy (food), they will survive the coldest weather nature can throw at them.

And as for the humans, we will dally in the outdoors but our chief comfort comes through fossil fuels, electricity and firewood, pondering nature's gifts that were observed and recorded during gentler seasons.

(Photos – P. Burke)