November 13, 2007

October Ramble - part two

I got up shortly before sunrise on Sunday morning in anticipation of the sub-zero temperatures that had been forecast. Even though it was already late October, central Ontario had still not experienced its first taste of winter, and I was very much looking forward to feeling the invigorating cold. And, being near Bancroft with its higher elevation (331 metres compared to 191metres in Peterborough), I was certain that the chill in the air would be significant.

Gingerly stepping out the patio door so as not to wake anyone, it became immediately evident that a total transformation in the weather had occurred over night. Gone were the high winds, mild dampness, heavy clouds, and rain. The sky was a clear blue, decorated only by a pale gibbous moon and the fading light of the planet Venus; the metal tank beside the trailer was coated in ice, and a heavy frost covered the ground, chairs, and cars. It was a wonderful sensation to once again feel the bite in the air after so many months of moderate temperatures.

Whereas yesterday, the fallen leaves were damp and spongy, allowing walking in relative silence, the cold this morning had made them brittle and noisy to tred on. The crackle was enough to flush two ruffed grouse from high in an apsen where they had been feeding on the buds.

Once the whirring of the grouses' wings had faded into the distance, I became acutely aware of just how quiet the morning was. Other than a small burst of wind that rustled a few aspen leaves and the hard 'pik' notes of a lone purple finch passing overhead, the silence was complete. There was no hum of distant traffic, no dogs barking or people talking, no planes flying over, and, being fall, no birds singing. Standing and listening to the absence of sound was deeply satisfying. Sigurd Olson, an American writer and conservationist, once said that "in the end we turn to nature in a frenzied chaotic world to find silence, oneness, wholeness, and spiritual release." Silence, even in many so-called wilderness areas, is such a rare commodity these days that when we are fortunate enough to experience it, we realize just how habituated we've become to living in an environment of constant man-made noise.

I decided to head up the main road hill and explore some nearby upland habitat. The call notes of a flock of birds feeding in the roadside grass caught my attention, and I stopped to see if they might be American tree sparrows. This arctic-nesting species winters in central Ontario and begins to arrive in late October. As I was raising my binoculars, I turned just in time to see the sun's fiery ball beginning to break over the top of a nearby ridge. The speed at which the sun ascends into the sky always amazes me. Within the space of only 30 seconds, it had already cleared the ridgetop and was sending its rays streaming across the valley. The sun's rapid climb skyward in the early morning always provides a sense of how quickly our planet is actually revolving on its axis. I sometimes have to remind myself, however, that the sun itself is not moving but rather the earth.

Pouring in from the side, early morning sunlight is the most flattering of all. As if a switch had been turned on, the sun's rays suddenly set the aspens aglow in lemon yellow, while nearby oaks glistened a rich orange-brown. The hump-shaped gibbous moon, hanging in the powder blue sky just above the trees, completed the scene and made it all the more memorable.

As the air warmed, the subtle calls of foraging chickadees and kinglets began to challenge the silence that had been almost complete up until now. Along with only a small handful of other winter-hardy species, they have the woods to themselves at this time of year. Almost all or our songbirds have vacated central Ontario by late October, and many have already arrived at their winter destinations in Latin America.

As I was checking out the kinglets, I noticed a tree with yellowish, papery bark that appeared to be almost standing on stilts. It was a yellow birch. How this species gets started in life is really quite

remarkable. Because germinating birch seeds are incapable of penetrating the thick, tough layer of mostly maple leaves that covers the forest floor, one of the few places they can actually anchor their roots is atop an old, rotting stump. Because stump tops are often blown leaf-free by the wind or are very uneven, they are able to provide a suitable site for the roots of tiny new plants to get a toehold. As the birch grows, however, the stump slowly disintegrates from underneath, eventually leaving the tree standing on its stilt-like roots.

Turning onto a dirt road that looked interesting, I headed up a steep hill. As I passed a stand of conifers, I was scolded by an outburst of loud chatter from an indignant red squirrel. The road surface was scattered with spruce twigs which these tree-top acrobats had nipped off the upper branches, before scurrying down to the ground to remove the cones and terminal buds. Although the buds are consumed immediately, the cones are stored for winter consumption.

I also noticed a large number of deer tracks in the sand on the shoulder of the road. It was only two weeks before the start of the hunt and deer were obviously on the move. Mating activity really stirs things up at this time of year as bucks are tracking does. All of this also means that more collisions involving deer take place in late October and early November than at any other time of year.

Next, I came across a dead beech tree covered in bracket fungi. They were a common species called tinder polypore which almost look like rounded, wooden shelves protruding from the tree. Beech seem to be a favourite victim of these invaders. The bracket, or mushroom, is only the visible part of the organism. The much larger part of the fungus is concealed in the dead or dying wood of the tree. This hidden portion is an extensive network of filaments collectively known as mycelium. They have the unique ability to actually physically penetrate the hardest of woods. They do so by secreting enzymes which chemically break the wood down into its constituent chemicals. In this way, fungi play a pivotal role in the forest ecosystem as decomposers and recyclers.

It also occurred to me that gilled fungi, the typical mushrooms with a flat or rounded cap, had been conspicuous by their absence these past two days. The dry conditions that prevailed for most of this summer and fall this year have not been conducive to allowing these fungi to "fruit." The purpose of the mushroom itself, of course, is to produce the millions of microscopic spores necessary for reproduction. I did, however, find a few bright, yellow-orange jelly fungi growing on tree stumps where they stood out prominently against the dark grey of decomposing wood.

Heading back to the trailer, the sun had already melted most of the frost off the leaf litter, once again allowing its wonderful smell to fill the air. Although the temperature was only a few degrees above zero, several buff-coloured moths were flying. These were probably winter moths, a non-native species that is active from mid-fall to early winter. They are usually seen at night and often in your car's headlights.

By mid-day, the sky was clouding over and the temperature dropping once again. Soon, the first snow I'd seen since last spring began to fall. It came down in the form of large pellets, some close to four millimetres in length. They were almost like little bits of styrofoam, and pattered noisily on the leaves. This type of snow is known as graupel and, as I later learned, is the type of snow associated with winter lightning!

On the way back down Highway 28 towards Peterborough, the sun once again came out and performed its magic on the aspens and oaks. I stopped to get a few last pictures. Wind and rain was forecast for the coming week and I knew that most of the leaves would not survive the assault. It was one last chance to capture a fragment of late October's fading beauty.

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