

Communion with Winter at KNSC

My case of cabin fever had been getting progressively worse. I had not had time to take advantage of the classic Canadian winter we've been enjoying this year and was afraid that warm temperatures and rain would soon put an end to it all. However, this past Saturday, I decided to put other jobs on hold, get out my skis, and head up to the Kawartha Nordic Ski Club (KNSC). For me at least, cross-country skiing is the perfect marriage of exercise and communion with nature in winter.

The KNSC trails are located on the east side of Highway 28 at Haultain, between Burleigh Falls and Apsley. 34 kilometres of groomed classic trails, 13 kms of groomed skating trails, and ten kms of wilderness trails all wind their way through the woods, providing some of the best cross-country skiing in Ontario. There is even a 10 km snowshoe trail. Three heated cabins at strategic locations along the trails make for a great place to warm up, have a bite to eat, and compare notes with fellow skiers. The trails are all expertly groomed and track set, meaning there are machine-made grooves in the snow in which to ski. Professional-quality maps with directions and distances are displayed at every trail junction and show alternative routes. Visit their website at kawarthanordic.ca

The trails are located both on private land and on land belonging to the Peterborough Crown Game Preserve. In late fall, the deer move into the area to take advantage of heavy coniferous tree cover. Under the spruce, fir, and cedars, there is far less snow which makes walking and feeding easier. The trees also afford protection from the wind. The preserve is also the winter home to small numbers of bald eagles which feed on the carcasses of the deer that die each winter. Eagles are occasionally observed soaring above the trails such as the immature bird seen last Friday.

After waxing my skis at the Wild Rock trailer – which also rents equipment and sells day passes - located at the trail head, I headed west on the Beaver Trail and then north on the Trillium. As I left the relative shade of the Beaver, my skis immediately picked up speed on the more sun-exposed snow of the Trillium trail. I always try to keep an eye on whatever plant material has fallen upon the snow, because there is often an interesting story to be told. On this particular day, the strong winds had brought down a number of oak leaves which momentarily slowed my progress as I skied over them. Oak trees tend to retain some of their leaves over much of the winter because, being primarily a southern species, they have an evolutionary history based on a longer growing season. Many southern oaks are in fact evergreen. A few tan-coloured pods from ironwood trees also littered the snow. The pods, each of which contains a hard nutlet, look like the fruit of hops. This explains the other common name for the tree of hop hornbeam. Several cones from a gigantic white pine towering overhead also provided visual distraction. White pines shed their cones over the late fall and winter, while those of red pine usually stay on until spring.

As I passed through a sheltered area near the junction with the Red Fox trail, the snow was covered with small sections of spruce twigs, no doubt the work of a red squirrel. These cuttings are made to get at the buds and seed-bearing cones that grow in clusters at the end of the fragile twigs. Because of the squirrels' weight, the easiest way to harvest them is to nip

these twigs off the parent branch, and then scurry down to the ground, harvest the meal, and carry it off to a storage site.

I was also keeping my eyes open for patches of blackened snow along the trail where it might look like someone had scattered ashes about. Such areas often indicate the presence of snowfleas. Also commonly known as springtails, these dark-coloured, two millimetre-long insects have an amazing jumping ability. They accomplish their incredible leaps thanks to two tiny tail-like appendages that are folded under the abdomen and held in place by a kind of hook. When the hook is released, the tail acts as a kind of catapult, sending the insect rocketing up to 13 cm ahead – a full 65 times the snowfleas body length. For some reason, snowfleas are often attracted to the sheltered depressions of cross-country ski tracks and sometimes congregate in such numbers as to turn the trail black. They somehow manage to find food on the snow in the form of microscopic algae, bacteria, and fungi. It may also be that these get-togethers on the snow allow the miniscule insects to find a mate. However, the relatively cold temperatures mustn't have been to the snowfleas liking on this particular day, because I was unable to find any.

I continued northward on the Trillium to the Wolf trail. Much of this area was recently logged. The increased sunlight and space has meant an explosion of new plant growth including numerous balsam poplars. I stopped for a moment to rub one of the large, gummy buds between my fingers. Bringing it up to my nose, I was immediately treated to the spicy smell of balsam, a smell that is so typical of spring in the Kawarthas.

Deer tracks are commonplace along the KNSC trails and, on occasion, the tracks of moose can be seen, as well. The tracks crisscrossing the Wolf came in a variety of sizes. As a deer grows, its hooves grow accordingly. For example, the track of the front hoof of a four year-old buck may be twice the size of a yearling doe's track. When a deer walks, it places its back hoof in the track of the front hoof. In areas of deep snow, it will often drag its feet. This is thought to be an adaptation to conserve energy. It's easy to forget that the white-tailed deer of the Kawarthas are at the northern fringe of their range and lack the proper anatomical adaptations to deal with deep snow.

From the Wolf trail, I carried on northward along the Kenner until I reached the Tanney Cabin. At least a dozen other skiers were already there. Warming up in front of a wood stove while enjoying a coffee and something to eat is definitely one of the joys of cross-country skiing. An added attraction at the Tanney Cabin is the opportunity to hand feed the numerous chickadees and nuthatches that hang out there. In fact, the birds are so brazen that they will often land on you before you even have a chance to open up your hand with an offering of sunflower seeds. As you can well imagine, this is a major attraction for kids. They are always thrilled to feel the tiny claws and near weightlessness of a chickadee or red-breasted nuthatch as it lands momentarily on bare skin in order to grab a seed. A supply of seeds is kept in the cabin, so the birds don't have to go long between feedings. Up until a few years ago, a family of gray jays also frequented the area of the Tanney Cabin and were equally tame. This was probably one of the most southerly populations of gray jays in the province.

The Kawartha Nordic area has a long history of attracting bird species like the gray jay that are more typical of Algonquin Park. Some of these include ravens, white-winged and red crossbills, three-toed woodpeckers, boreal chickadees, and even the occasional great gray owl. In fact, there have been reports of a possible great gray being seen just last week.

I decided to head back to the parking lot by way of the Owl and Kawartha trails, thereby completing a big loop. The Kawartha is much hillier than the Trillium, but it takes you through numerous picturesque stands of red and white pine, balsam fir, white spruce, and white cedar. In fact, the entire trail would make for a great workshop in conifer identification. There are also many species of lichens growing on the trees along much of this trail. One of the most common is the Green shield lichen (*Flavoparmelia caperata*) which covers some of the trunks almost entirely. There are also numerous small wetlands along the Kawartha, one of which, I noticed, had recently been traversed by an otter. When otters travel through snow, they often slide on their stomach between pushes with the feet. This creates a distinctive flat-bottomed groove through the snow.

Just after I turned east off the Kawartha to take the short 0.3 km trail to the parking lot, two young boys went flying past me using the much faster skating technique of skiing – as opposed to classic. All of a sudden, they slammed the breaks on. I soon understood why. There, standing motionless on the edge of the trail – and looking more like something you'd see in a museum display - was a huge whitetail buck. I had time to stop and actually admire the animal before it went bounding back into the woods. The boys were ecstatic to have been so close to such a big deer. What a wonderful way to wrap up a day of skiing.

Although I also enjoy downhill skiing, I never get the same satisfying feeling at the end of the day as I do with cross-country. It's the satisfaction of having gotten a great aerobic workout while at the same time having embraced the Canadian winter. And, by simply paying attention to my surroundings, I almost always get a chance to peer into the lives of the many creatures that carry on with business as usual, even in the cold and snow.