

April 26, 2005

## **Mammal-watching**

April and May are busy months for mammals. A large number of species are giving birth right now including beavers, foxes, otters, porcupines, groundhogs, skunks, cottontails and raccoons. By mid-May, moose will also become parents, followed shortly by white-tailed deer. Some species, such as grey squirrels and black bears, have already had their young. All of this activity often makes for good mammal-watching opportunities.

The grey squirrel is one animal that everyone is familiar with and is easy to observe. Females give birth in March but their babies won't be leaving the nest until early May. In the coming weeks, watch for the half-grown youngsters feeding with their mother and learning to feed on their own - often right below your birdfeeder. By June, they are usually able to fend for themselves. The mother's work is not over, however, as she will often mate again in the late spring and deliver a second litter in July or August.

Dens in hollow trees are the preferred nest sites for raising young. However, squirrels will also use leaf nests or "dreys", located high in trees. In fact, they usually have several dreys and will move the young from one to another. The outer layer of the drey consists of interwoven twigs and leaves while an inner layer is built up with softer materials such as shredded bark, leaves, fur, grass as well as scraps of cloth and paper. Dreys are resistant to cold spring winds and provide protection when tree den sites may be in short supply. Grey squirrels will sometimes also nest in attics and even on apartment balconies.

Red foxes can also provide good viewing opportunities in the spring. The kits, which average about five in number, are born any time between March and May. The female remains with the kits for the first month or so while the male does most of the hunting. At about one month of age, the kits are weaned and begin to begin to play about the den entrance. Their parents bring prey items such as meadow voles for the kits to play with. In this way, the young learn the smell of the prey and how to eat it. Adult foxes may continue to feed the kits at the den site for as long as two months.

Fox dens are often located in an abandoned groundhog hole or excavated by the adults on a sandy slope, frequently at the edge of a woods. Foxes will also dig out a den under barns and other human-made structures. Fortunately for mammal-watchers, the same den may be used for many years. It is best to approach a den slowly from a downwind direction and to stop often in order not to startle the animals. You should also watch for foxes along road margins in the early morning twilight as they scavenge for roadkill. Look for the glimmer of the animal's green eyes in the headlights.

Eastern cottontail rabbits, too, can put on quite a show in the spring. Usually after dark but sometimes in the early morning twilight, mating pairs of cottontails will square off in a manner reminiscent of bighorn sheep. The buck chases the doe rabbit until she eventually turns and faces him. She then actually spars at him with her fore paws. The two will then run headlong at each other as if to butt heads. However, at the last instant, one animal will jump almost two feet in the air while the other runs beneath it. The pair repeat this bizarre nuptial ritual a number of times before actually mating. Female cottontails usually have three to four litters in a year, averaging five babies. They construct a ground nest in a protected place a few days before giving birth. Cottontails have been quite abundant locally these last few years.

A growing number of people are also reporting sightings of black bears in the Kawarthas. Usually sometime in April, the males emerge from winter dens, Barren females will emerge from their dens a short time later and then females with yearling cubs. Mothers with newborn cubs are the last to emerge. A bear will have lost 15 to 40 percent of its fall weight by the time it comes out of hibernation and will actually continue to lose weight for several more weeks as well. It will not fully gain its weight back until berries become abundant in the summer.

In April and May, bears are forced to adopt a mostly vegetarian diet. They graze heavily on grass and will even eat dandelions because of their high nectar content. Before the leaves appear, bears will also consume large amounts of balsam poplar buds which are believed to act as a laxative and help to restore the animal's digestive system after the winter fast. When aspens leaf out, they will also eat huge quantities of the new, tender leaves and climb right up to the tops of the trees to reach them. Dumps are often the best place to see bears, but only from the safety of your car. Our local bear population seems to be increasing, with many sightings in areas such as Dummer and Asphodel townships.

Although mammals are usually harder to find and observe than other animals, there are ways to improve your chances. First of all, the early morning period from twilight to about two hours after sunrise is usually the best time to be out looking. I would argue that it is also the most peaceful and beautiful time of the day. Dusk and after dark can also be productive times. An effective method is to simply sit quietly in your car in an area where two or more habitat types come together. This may be where a woodlot borders on a marsh or near a field that is bisected by a shrub or fence row. Fence rows are especially good for red fox and coyote, because the fence "breaks up" the animal's body structure and thereby provides camouflage. Use binoculars to scan the fence row from your car. Coyotes are often seen right out in the middle of fields as well. Another means of seeing mammals is to simply drive slowly along back roads at twilight and after dark.

I have also had some luck attracting mammals by producing a squeaking noise which is said to sound like injured prey. This is achieved by pursing your lips and making a tight kissing and sucking sound on the knuckles of your index and middle fingers. With practice, you should be able to achieve a high-pitched squeal. It sometimes works better if you lick your knuckles first. Predatory mammals such as weasels and foxes can be attracted in this manner as well as birds. You need to continue making the sound for at least a minute or two. Don't expect results everytime, however, other than maybe strange looks from passers-by!

What to watch for this week:

Skins of high-flying northern Canada Geese should be passing over this week and next as they make their way to nesting grounds on James Bay. Also look for loons, either alone or in pairs, flying due north in the early morning right over the city.

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