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LIVING

Autumn ramble I

Heading up Highway 28 on this mild, wet, late-October morning, the contrast in the foliage between countryside and city was immediately noticeable.



OUR CHANGING SEASONS
Drew Monkman

Other than the pale gold of roadside tamaracks, the orange-brown of oaks on distant hill tops, and the lemon yellow of scattered groves of aspens, all of the leaves were off the trees. Much of Peterborough, on the other hand, still looked like late summer.

Because so many of our city trees are non-native, they retain their leaves much longer and don't really give us a true sense of the season the way native species do. We were getting together with our friends Bob and Maggie at their property just outside of Bancroft and looking forward to exploring the area. I hadn't had a chance to walk in the woods for several weeks and was looking forward to it.

Despite the rain, Bob and I immediately set out on a walk. The forest floor was an almost uniform expanse of brown leaves. When you think of all the weeks that are necessary for the leaves to reach their full colour, it's amazing how fast the colour drains out once they have fallen. There is compensation, however, in their spicy, smoky smell, an aroma that always transports me back to the autumns of years past. The warmth and dampness of the weather on this particular day seemed to amplify the smell of the leaf litter all the more.

With nearly all the leaves now on the ground, it was as though a veil had been lifted. Much that had been hidden from view since last spring was suddenly exposed. Ferns stood out in particular. The picture-perfect lacy fronds of evergreen wood ferns were everywhere. They actually remain a deep green all winter long and, in this way, are able to begin photosynthesis as soon as the frost goes out of the ground in the spring. Also decorating the forest floor were small oak saplings, their leaves still surprisingly red. Club-mosses, too, like ground pine and ground cedar, were common. These ancient plants could easily be mistaken for tiny conifers.

Not all of the trees had joined the mad rush to rid themselves of leaf, however. Many of the small ironwoods, maples, and especially beech still clung to some of their foliage. The beech leaves in particular caught our attention. A rich yellow-brown in colour, most were in immaculate condition. Obviously, the forest's legions of insects had given them the cold shoulder.

As we walked along, Bob pointed out a red-eyed vireo's nest, located in the crotch of a low branch. It formed a tightly-knit cup and was intricately appointed with strands of birch bark. Its owners, however, were already well on their way to their winter territory in the Amazon.

Fall is not a time of rich sound and today was no exception. Bird song, as opposed to calls, was total-

Brown leaves on the forest floor produce a spicy, smoky aroma that transports me back to autumns of years past



Clockwise, from top: Wine-coloured leaves of wild raspberry; ground cedar (a type of club-mosswood fern); beech leaves; and wood fern.

ly absent. Song requires far too much energy for birds to engage in when its reproductive purpose is for another season. There were, however, the occasional baritone croaks of ravens circling above and the shrill screams of blue jays. The lisp of a flock of waxwings broke the silence on one occasion and, a little later, the buzzy call notes of roaming bands of pine siskins. Several times, we also scared up a ruffed grouse. The explosion of sound from their whirring wings always quickens the pulse. A spring peeper, too, occasionally added its plaintive voice, obviously coaxed into action by the abnormally warm weather.

We stopped in a grove of balsam fir where the soft chatter of a chickadee had caught my attention. I began to make a soft "pish" noise and, as is always the case with this species, the bird responded immediately. It soon approached to within a metre of us. Less than a minute later, a dozen more chickadees had shown up and adorned the branches all around us.

Other species, too, came in to investigate what all the commotion was about. These included both a red-breasted and a white-breasted nuthatch, a downy woodpecker, and a golden crowned kinglet. The nuthatches were so intent on feeding, however, that they continued to search out morsels of food even as they moved in closer in response to the sound. The woodpecker and kinglet also continued to forage, never coming very close and only

appearing mildly curious about the bothersome noise. The chickadees, on the other hand, seemed entirely focused on the pishing itself.

The abundance of chickadees is really quite impressive. You may hear one, or none, and begin to pish and soon there can be more birds than you can keep track of. I am always amazed how this innocuous little sound seems to bring birds in out of nowhere.

There are numerous theories as to why pishing works. It may be because it mimics the sound of a bird that is hurt, or resembles the alarm calls that some birds give. This, in turn, seems to compel other birds in the area to see for themselves what the problem is. Although it appears strange that birds would come to the scene of potential danger, it's really quite common in the avian world. Birds will often mob and harass a predator such as an owl, for example. This may be a way of distracting the predator or driving it out of the area. Even small songbirds will often join in.

Heading back to the trailer, we walked down along a hydro line toward a marshy area where tamarack were putting on a show. With each gust of wind, more needles blew off the branches and powdered the ground with "tamarack gold." In stark contrast, a few nearby speckled alder still had green leaves. Unlike nearly all other native trees, the leaves of the alder do not change colour but fall from the twig when they are still green. The smell of the damp

soil and decomposing vegetation here was quite different from that of the forest and far less pleasant. Unfortunately, the English language is poorly armed when it comes to describing smells!

As the rain began to fall a little harder, the quickest way back was along the road. Here, a few small willows still retained some green leaves. Pine cone willow galls, a cone-like growth that occurs when a midge lays its eggs in the willow's tissues, were very much in evidence. As for the roadside colour that was so prominent only a week or so earlier, all that remained were scattered remnants of wine-coloured raspberry, strawberry, and oak leaves.

Later in the afternoon, we headed out again, this time to explore a stand of hemlock and oak at the top of a nearby hill. Hemlock groves are always interesting habitats. The tall, old trees can sometimes seem like pillars in a cathedral as they let through shafts of light. These groves are also of great value to wildlife. Deer often bed down in them in winter, while porcupines find suitable feeding and denning sites. Hemlocks also attract yellow-bellied sapsuckers, as attested by the thousands of tiny drillings we found in the bark. As for blackburnian warblers, they usually nest nowhere else.

Growing among the hemlocks, we also noted a new tree species for the day, a striped maple. The dainty white stripes were very noticeable against the greenish

bark of the older branches. The large, unmaple-like leaves had already fallen.

A little further on, we came across an old aspen where a pileated woodpecker had been at work. Unlike the clean, precise drillings of most woodpeckers, the pileated visiting this tree had been more intent on simply ripping it apart. It looked like the bird's beak was armed with a buzz saw. Wood chips were scattered in every direction. The tell-tale tunnels of carpenter ants, the pileated's favourite food, were easily seen in the punky wood.

The rain that had been dogging us all afternoon once again grew in intensity. We decided to take a shortcut directly down the face of the ridge, passing by evergreen rock polypody ferns growing on some of the exposed granite. Much colder weather with a chance of snow had been forecast for Sunday, and it was already evident that a front was beginning to move through. A tarpaulin we'd set up earlier collapsed in the strong wind and the temperature was dropping quickly. I went to bed looking forward to fall's first taste of winter.

(Next week: Part II)

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