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LIVING

Spring comes to Big Gull lake

Weekend at Kaladar area cottage reveals treasure of sights, smells and sounds

Try to imagine what it might feel like if a frog climbed inside your ear and began calling at full volume. That's about the only way I can describe the noise level of the spring peeper chorus I was hearing on a late April evening. Seeing the tiny frogs, however, was another matter. While I searched in vain with the flashlight, a nearby barred owl called repeatedly, almost as if laughing at my futile attempts.

My wife, Michelle, and I were spending the weekend at my brother and sister-in-law's cottage on Big Gull Lake, just south of Bon Echo Provincial Park near Kaladar. We have been coming to Eric and Elaine's property for nearly 20 years but had never visited in early spring. I wanted to see how the plants and animals would be different at this time of the year, even though the mix of species found here is pretty much identical to that of the northern Kawarthas.



Drew Monkman
OUR CHANGING SEASONS

We arose Saturday morning to cool temperatures but abundant sunshine. Yellow-rumped and pine warblers, along with a single blue-headed vireo, were singing in the aspens and white pines in front of the cottage. A winter wren, too, advertised its presence with the occasional outpouring of its ridiculously long, jumbled song. In the distance, the plaintive whistles of a hermit thrush could also be heard. Every once in a while, the bird song was punctuated by the drumming of a yellow-bellied sapsucker and the yodeling of a loon.

However, it was the white blossoms of the Juneberries that really stole the show. Juneberries are small trees that also go by the names of serviceberry, shadbush and Amelanchier. They were in full flower everywhere, adding splashes of luminous white to the pastel greens of emerging birch and aspen leaves. While driving up from Peterborough the evening before, we had noticed that they were particularly abundant on the rocky ridges both west and north of Kaladar. In fact, I had never seen so many.

Another shrub in bloom this weekend was the leatherwood. Usually only a metre or two tall, they were covered in pale yellow, tubular flowers that hung in clusters. The plant's name comes from the leathery, pliant, and nearly unbreakable twigs which can serve as an emergency survival rope. A little more searching around the cottage also produced several species in flower, including a large stand of hepaticas and northern white violets. The three lower petals of this tiny, fragrant violet are decorated with beautiful purple veins which insects recognize as nectar guides - patterns that guide pollinators to the nectar and pollen.

Despite the odd splash of colour, the forest floor itself appeared pretty much the way I'd last seen it back in November. The fallen leaves had not decayed a great deal and still formed a uniform, light brown carpet. The only real greens were a few ferns and moss-



KARL EGRESSY photo

es. Wood fern, an evergreen species, still lay flat against the ground, having not yet sprung back from the weight of the winter snows. Rock polypody, another evergreen fern, decorated rocky ledges and large boulders. The only real smell came from the leaf mould.

After breakfast we decided to walk down to a nearby swampy lake where hunters had erected wood duck boxes. Three hooded mergansers immediately took off as we came up to the water's edge but didn't go far. We were able to enjoy good looks at the males' resplendent spring plumage, glistening in the early morning sun. As we watched the ducks, we also noticed that much of the shoreline was ringed by shrubs covered in thousands of small, white flowers. Rubbing and then smelling a leaf, I was able to identify them as sweetgale. The foliage has a sweet, somewhat resinous scent and can apparently be used as an insect repellent.

Next, we came across a yellow-bellied sapsucker methodically excavating small holes in a red maple. Sapsuckers actually make two kinds of sap holes. Some are deep and round while others

are rectangular-shaped and shallow. The latter must be maintained continually for the sap to flow.

As the sun climbed higher and the temperature warmed, we decided to walk up the main road towards another small lake. As we were hoping, the heat had inspired a lot more insect activity. Eastern pine elfins flew up from the sandy road surface continuously as we walked along. These small butterflies appear all brown but, upon closer investigation, intricate gray and black patterns can be seen on the underside of the hindwing. The caterpillars of this species feed on pine needles, hence the name. A few spring azures were also flying. Entirely blue above, this tiny butterfly is unmistakable and always a joy to see after a long winter.

Dragonflies, too, had joined the insect parade. Flying only short distances before resting quietly on the road, it was easy to get good looks at them with our close-focusing binoculars. The moist, glistening wings indicated that they were juveniles whose wings had not completely hardened. They were all the same species, Hudsonian whitefaces. They had probably emerged from nearby ponds that very morning.

Despite the severe lack of rain in April there were still a few spring runoff ponds along the side of the road. We immediately found the gelatinous egg mass of a spotted salamander. These masses are typically attached to vegeta-



DREW MONKMAN photo

Two of the more spectacular contributors to the spring scenery near Gull Lake were Juneberry blossoms (above) and hooded mergansers (left). Other signs that the season had changed included sightings of the blue-headed vireo (inset, bottom left) and the miniature, newly developed leaves on a stand of red maples (inset, below right).



KARL EGRESSY photo

light gray, the key field mark of the hoary elfin.

We finally arrived back at the cottage and headed down to the dock to simply when so much life is unfolding all around. A small flock of "ducks" half way across the lake caught my eye. To my surprise, they weren't ducks at all but grebes that were migrating north. Even more surprising, there were two different species in the flock, horned grebe and eared grebe. The latter is a species at risk. Grebes represent an ancient evolutionary lineage and were once thought to be related to loons; however, this has now been disproved.

Later in the afternoon, Michelle and Elaine asked me to come down to the dock because there was a strange humming sound. With a little searching we soon discovered that thousands of midges, a tiny, mosquito-like insect, were swarming in undulating clouds over the top of some adjacent cedar trees. The males form these swarms and use a species-specific high-pitched sound to attract females. The females enter the swarm, mate and fly off to lay their eggs on the water's surface. Midge larvae are aquatic and live in the soft organic bottoms of water bodies. The only function of adult midges is to swarm, mate, and lay their eggs. They don't even eat!

As this day had demonstrated, the arrival of warm weather in April and May triggers change at a dizzying pace. The only frustration is trying to keep up with it all. There are so many stories unfolding.

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DREW MONKMAN photo

tion or sticks beneath the water's surface. The 30 to 250 eggs hatch six to eight weeks after being deposited.

For me, spring is all about smells, and this day was no exception. As I expected, the spicy balsam poplar was the signature scent of the morning. I took some time to photograph the emerging leaves that are exquisite in colour, in texture and, of course, in odour. Another wonderful smelling plant of early spring was growing only a stone's throw away. Known as trailing arbutus, it has pink or white flowers and evergreen, leathery leaves. We had to get down on hands and knees, however, to appreciate its fragrant perfume.

With so much to see, smell, touch, hear and, of course, photograph, you can well imagine that we weren't covering very much ground. We hadn't gone another 20 steps before Michelle pointed out a small stand of red maples - the tree with the perfect name. Their immaculate, miniature leaves, absolutely pristine in shape and feel had already emerged. At this early stage of growth the leaves are red instead of green.

Next, we made a short detour off the