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LIVING

High summer at Big Gull Lake

You'll hear hummingbirds and insects by day, owls and loons by night

At least once each season, my family has the pleasure of spending time at my brother's cottage on Big Gull Lake, north of Kaladar. Nature at Big Gull always has something of interest to offer, no matter what the month or time of day. The mid-summer visit we made two weeks ago was no exception. The daylight hours resonated with insect sounds and the whirring of hummingbird wings, but it's the loons and owls that ruled the night. With the Summer Triangle sparkling overhead, most nights resounded with the loons' wail and tremolo calls. The wail, which is eerily close to the howl of a wolf,



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OUR CHANGING SEASONS

serves primarily to locate a mate or chick. It's almost as if the loon is saying "where are you?" The tremolo - also known the laughing call - seems to be associated with vocally advertising and defending a territory. It is also used when a pair of loons "duet" back and forth.

Not to be out done, a pair of Barred Owl also chimed in from time to time. Their rhythmic, strongly accented call is often phoneticized as, "Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you all?" As with the loons, the hooting probably serves to advertise ownership of territory and to help keep track of the young birds that, although out of the cavity nest since May, are fed by the parents until late summer.

Most afternoons, I took a walk along the narrow, sandy cottage road. A minor annoyance was the half-dozen deer flies that kept me company most of the time, some of which seemed unaware that insect repellent is meant to repel them. One thing that helped me to ignore the flies, however, was the thought of jumping into the cool lake upon my return. Although early summer's flush of bloom was clearly finished, there were still a few roadside plants in flower. Maybe the most attractive was the Purple-flowering Raspberry with its pink, rose-like blossoms. Large-leaved Asters also added splashes of violet there and there. There were even a few Grass-leaved and Early goldenrods in bloom, presaging the yellow goldenrod surf that spells late summer in Central Ontario.

I was particularly interested this year to see how the trees and shrubs were faring after last summer's drought, which had been quite devastating in the Kaladar-Bon Echo area. To my surprise, there was little sign of any lasting damaging, except for a few dead patches of Common Juniper on exposed rocks near the lakeshore. What really caught my attention, though, was the abundance of the seed and berry crop on nearly all the trees and shrubs, including the dogwoods, oaks, maples, blackberries and blueberries. I don't remember the Pin Cherries ever being so heavily laden with fruit.

Twelve months ago, many of these small trees appeared nearly dead. Strangely enough, the profusion of fruit can be directly linked to the severe conditions of last summer. Trees will often respond to life-threatening stresses such as drought or insect invasions by producing a huge crop of flowers the following spring and, if pollination and weather conditions cooperate, an abundance of seed and fruit.

It's almost as if the trees are reacting to their own possible demise by putting a huge amount of energy into assuring the survival of their genes in the next generation. In other words, they are going all out to make baby trees, before they may no longer be able to do so. I



Owl photo by KARL EGRESSY



Insect photos by DREW MONKMAN

Spotted at Big Gull Lake near Kaladar: (clockwise from top): Immature White-Faced Meadowhawk; Dog-day Cicada beside nymphal shell; Rusty-Patched Bumblebee on goldenrod; Barred Owl.



could see that Black Bears were doing their part to spread the plant genes because, at several locations along the road, I saw piles of loose, formless bear scat, made up entirely of seeds and berries.

Unfortunately, the drought was not so kind to the butterflies. No species was common and many expected species were completely absent. The most likely explanation is that the drought had killed a large percentage of last summer's butterfly eggs and caterpillars. Also, because there were almost no blooms to glean nectar from, many adults may have died before they could

even lay eggs.

One of my favourite habitats to investigate along the road is an old sandpit, somewhat overgrown with Balsam Poplars. This is always a good place to see insects such as Carolina Locusts and various short-horned grasshoppers. There are also some small wet areas where frogs and dragonflies usually abound. What really caught my attention this summer, however, was a large patch of the much-maligned Purple Loosestrife. A redeeming quality of this attractive plant is how profusely it offers up nectar to visiting insects. Most days, the loosestrife patch was alive with

hover flies, wasps, several skipper butterflies and at least a dozen Rusty-patched Bumblebees. This once-common bee has declined from an estimated 87% of its historic range in recent years.

For me, enjoying nature is as much listening as watching. On a mid-summer afternoon, it's easy to think that bird life has mostly disappeared. Other than Red-eyed Vireos and the odd Hermit Thrush or Pine Warbler, there was little song to be heard. Contact calls, however, were a definite presence. In many areas, I could hear the husky, muffled calls of fledglings such as baby

chickadees and warblers, probably reminding their parents that they were hungry. The high-pitched calls of Cedar Waxwings were also common. This is a species that must be thrilled by the huge fruit crop on the cherries and dogwoods.

It wasn't always necessary to walk the cottage road to find something of interest. The cottage dock, where we spent a good portion of each day, offered up a continual series of intriguing sightings. An American Mink with a Green Frog in its mouth, a female Common Merganser with four young in tow, Common Ravens croaking overhead and even a soaring Bald Eagle seen by my son-in-law, Alec, were just a few of the interesting sightings to be had. My daughter, Julia - a highly talented nature spotter - also pointed out a Dog-day Cicada on the trunk of a maple. The "harvest fly" had just emerged from the ground and had molted out of its nymphal shell which lay empty beside it. We couldn't get over how perfectly the insect's coloration matched the bark and lichen of the tree.

Only an incredibly sharp-eyed predator would have ever seen it. Over the next couple of days, we found at least a half-dozen more freshly-emerged cicadas climbing up the tree trunks. While still nymphs, these noisy insects spend several years in the ground, making a living sucking the sap from tree roots.

Competing for our attention at the waterfront was the constant parade of dragonflies and damselflies. By far the most common dragonfly fly was the White-faced Meadowhawk. Nearly all of these were the yellow-brown immatures. Only the adult males are bright red. Of interest, too, were several species of small, dainty damselflies. Using Ed Lam's "Damselflies of the Northeast", I was able to identify the Common Spreadwing, Spotted Spreadwing and the ubiquitous Powdered Dancer. I know I probably won't remember the names come next summer, but I will still have a greater appreciation for the huge diversity that exists within this beautiful but largely ignored group of insects.

At the cottage itself, Ruby-throated Hummingbirds were a constant presence, as were the sounds of their high-pitched chirping and the whir of their wings - 53 wing beats per second! Attracted by the two feeders by the kitchen window, there were sometimes four or five of these pugnacious little birds at a time. They constantly chased each other from the feeders, as if convinced that there was not enough sugar water for all to share. Some of the birds were juveniles birds from this year's brood. My grand-daughter, Anouk, was understandably fascinated by the hummingbirds, alerting us from her booster chair at the kitchen table each time she saw them at the feeder. "Hummingbird, Mamie!"

As is the case in every month of the year, premonitions of the season to come were also present. Some of the Red Maples growing beside the dock already had red leaves. A few Heart-leaved Asters, a common fall species, were even in bloom. However, I've also learned not to rush the season and to try to enjoy high-summer for what it is, despite my longing for the cool weather and vibrant colour just around the corner.

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