

"IF WINTER COMES - CAN SPRING BE FAR BEHIND"

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Winter is a time for long, long thoughts. Severe as it has been there was no lack of opportunity "to turn at beauty's glance to find tired eyes rested - sight enriched."

There is always something to arouse one's interest during a walk on the prairie. A blanket of snow is but another back-drop before which unfold perhaps as much drama - though so often unseen - as before the green or gold curtains of other seasons.

Breath-taking beauty awaited us on our usual walk after the first deep snowfall. The local golf course overnight had become a veritable fairyland. There was sheer music in the rounded contours, the rhythm of line of the creek bed; the shelters to the south appeared like fluffy iced cakes set out on beds of jewelled swansdown; the trees were heavy with glitter in this new white world: piles of lumber were fantastic - cosy! -- beneath luxurious blankets of fleecy white. Ours were the first steps to mar the perfection of the landscape, or so we thought, until we reached a clump of dogbane near bushes of Curled-dock on the higher bank of the creek. Here, like etchings on the snow surface, were the unmistakable footmarks of grouse. They had enjoyed an early breakfast. New interest had been added to our walk in the crisp air.

As we watched for other signs of birds, a flock of Snow Buntings flew overhead -- attracted to the same dock seeds. We heard a little flock of chickadees in the distant trees. There, also, were rabbit tracks. While Fogarty tried to make his mind about pursuit, I pondered anew the wonders of nature.

The stiff spiny hairs on the feet of the grouse are grown in the winter time to act as snowshoes. The thick pads of fur on the rabbits' feet are grown in winter - to act as snowshoes, too. The coat of white which makes it look like an animated clump of snow, as we watch it disappear to the west, is not only to make it difficult to spot by its enemies; it enables it to withstand the cold, for, of course, there is less radiation of animal heat from white than from any other color.

Coming back reluctantly we found the crumbs of Fogarty's dog biscuit had attracted many small birds. The next day in the same spot near the rose bushes we left some ground suet and oatmeal. Where the dock caught the sun to turn its brown to russet red we left provisions too. So long as we were able to take that walk we played host to chickadees, pine grosbeaks, snowbirds, Bohemians, rabbits and grouse. Other footmarks left by our guests we were unable to identify.

Our great regret is that during really cold weather, when the snow is deep, we are unable to care for even the few when the need is great. Thinking of possible suffering of little wild things, the question comes to mind: what happens when birds grow old - when their winter of life comes around?

Mathews quotes Long in a pathetic, though beautiful, instance of the touching sight of the passing of the little, aged Wood Warbler which he found loitering beside the spring near his tent. He writes: "The little bird is Nature's exponent of the joy of living; his song never dies with him, he passes it on! But the singer - where, what - so little indication is there of such a thing -- is his end?"