

## “A Woodland Journey”

By RAY PETERSON, R.R. 2, Tofield, Alberta

Have you ever ridden thirty miles through unsettled forest upon a big, plodding, skid-horse with only the meagre thickness of denim jeans separating your sitting part from a hard, bone-ridged back? I did a couple of springs ago and I enjoyed every moment of that ten hour trip.

Three of us were roughing it in an old logging camp. After spring breakup the trail became impassible except by saddle horse or foot. Our mail was left at the nearest settler's farm, a distance of fifteen miles. When my hankering for news from home got out of hand I decided to go for it, pony express style. Thus it was, that Prince, a large, bay skid-horse and I struck out from camp at five-thirty, one fine, early May morning.

There is something exhilarating and exciting about a horseback ride in the virgin hours of the morning. The frost-spiced air was sweet and refreshing, brimming with woodsy scents and perfumes. From secluded swales and glades came the elusive thrum of Ruffed grouse's love drums. Enthroned on a spruce tip spearing grandly into the dawn, a robin trilled sweetly, and out of the swamps came a steady chorus of frog pipers. A Great Horned owl eyed me solemnly from a gnarled, long-dead tamarack, then drifted ahead of me on uncannily silenced wings to disappear into the dark depths of the forest. Excitedly I watched a beautiful Pileated woodpecker seeking a tree restaurant to serve him his breakfast menu of wood grubs and other tree pests. Squirrels scolded and sassed me and once a shaggy porcupine lumbered lazily along the trail.

I passed through a wonderful stand of aspen whose densely clustered trunks gleamed clean and white in the morning light, columns of a great woodland temple. There were gloomy thickets of swamp spruce where night seemed to still linger and glorious avenues of tall, slender-boled pine that flung their tufted crests proudly into the blue.

Game trails, old and new, zig-



The Embarass River

zagged through the alder flats, wandered through the poplar bluffs, rutted the vast carpets of Labrador tea, and even followed the old logging trail itself. I saw where the heavy, splayed track of a moose had stamped out the daintiest spoor of its lesser cousin, a deer. At a turn in the road, printed plainly in the mud, was the sinister footprints of a timber wolf.

So engrossed, the hours slipped by. Almost suddenly it seemed, I was at the ford of the Embarass River. The farm lay nearby on the opposite side of the river.

Sullen grey, the serpentine body of the river swirled swiftly between its banks of shale and clay. An uprooted spruce tree swept by, twisting and turning helplessly in the river's hungry grasp. I shivered. To my inexperienced eye, this roaring, hundred yard stretch of water was a formidable barrier. Old Prince, however, as if sensing my fears, took the bit in his teeth and plunged confidently into the river. The water boiled up on his flanks and licked at my rubber boots, but the horse pressed solidly forward, picking his way carefully until we clambered up the far bank.

The river didn't look quite so fearsome when we recrossed it on our homeward jaunt. I dismounted upon a high bank that hung over the stream. Prince munched contentedly on his ration of oats, then dozed

in the warm spring sun as I ate my lunch and read my mail. I marvelled at a daring poplar tree below me that arched its trunk recklessly over the eager, grasping waters, and watched endless flotillas of foam-boats dart past with the restless current.

The return to camp was not just a repetition of the ride out. Rather it was another act in a continuous drama, a new page in Nature's voluminous notebook.

As I passed through a long-deserted logging camp, a lithe, brown form streaked across my path. A weasel. A cock Spruce grouse, or Fool Hen as it is aptly called, primed unconcernedly from a moss-upholstered stump. Chirping boisterously, a pair of chipmunks played tag along the crumpling walls of a roofless bunkhouse. The forest was gradually reclaiming its own here. Soon there would be little sign of this logging site where men in the Hungry thirties had labored for a tithe of today's bush wages.

I tugged a twig from a heavily-needed, grey-barked Balsam fir and its strong, musky scent clung to my hands. Sleek, grey-plumaged Whiskey Jacks, or more formally, Canada jays, were common along the trail, as were busy little Downy woodpeckers, and ever-cheerful Brown-capped chickadees. Once, upon a high poplar ridge, I thought that I glimpsed a browsing elk.

I dismounted at a swift, gurgling creek and searched for the sight of trout in its deep, spruce-shadowed pools. No luck, but I routed a lone Mallard drake, and discovered a neatly chiseled stump that some beaver workman had left as proof of his industry.

Shadows were deepening through the woods when I wandered into camp. I was hungry and a bit stiff from riding so far bareback. It was a trifling price, however, to pay for such an absorbing, wonderful journey.

## DID YOU KNOW . . .

**THAT** Bill Moncur, Box 182, Boissevain, Man., is an enthusiastic archaeologist and is very interested in building up his collection. He would like to purchase Indian relics, old guns, etc.

## Jet-Propelled Robin

By Ed Reid, Edmonton, Alta.

I am not too sure if birds have heard that jet propulsion is the coming thing or not, but after watching the antics of a robin last summer I am beginning to wonder!

It happened this way. A firm believer in the old fashioned rain barrel around the house as a precaution against flash fires, I installed one last year under the eaves near the kitchen window. And it wasn't long before Mother Nature responded with a real downpour (quite common last year, you may remember) that filled it right to the top.

Birds weren't long in discovering the rain barrel and it soon became popular as a drinking fountain. Thinking that some might come to an untimely and "watery" end, I soon devised little "life rafts" of shingles upon which they might alight in safety and drink to their heart's content. The birds soon caught on and we all had lots of fun watching them through the window.

Imagine my surprise one day when I looked out to see a robin perched on one end of a raft, propelling himself at a great rate around the rain barrel.

How did he do it? Apparently he had discovered that by standing on one end of the shingle, his weight lowered his tail to the level of the water, and by a simple process of vigorously propelling his tail backwards and forwards, he was able to "speed-boat" himself around the barrel in great style — and mighty pleased with himself too!

Perhaps he was just a transient in our neighborhood, or once was enough for his adventurous spirit, because we never had a repeat performance from our jet-propelled robin.

## Ducks Here All Winter

A. L. Brokopsky, Lucky Lake

We have had Mallard Ducks here all winter. I saw about 200 in one flock, on January 28 and again on February 3 and on March 5. Later on in March I saw 19 again. They were at the exact spot every time — about 12 miles south of Riverhurst, on the west side of the Saskatchewan River.