

BIRDS, BUGS AND BEARS

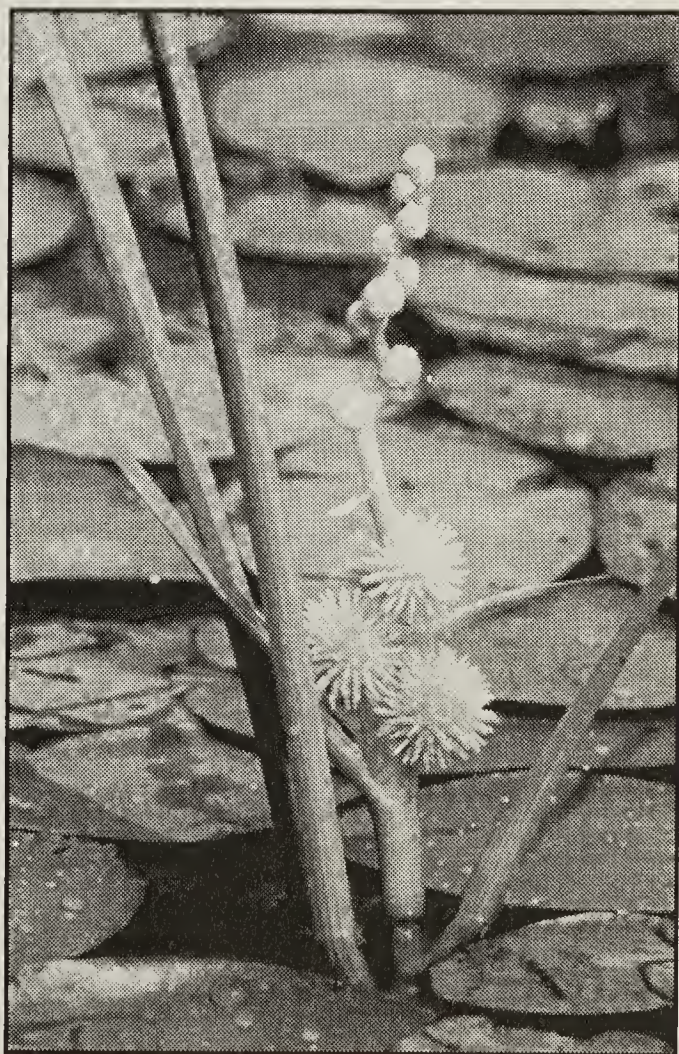
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For five years I have worked as a field biology consultant for a number of agencies, conducting bird and plant surveys. It is an ideal career for an avid birder and botany enthusiast. Most people have no idea what I actually do and many would be amazed to see it first hand. Bird surveys, particularly those deep in the boreal forest, are far more than counting birds. I recently finished my third season conducting bird surveys in Duck Mountain Provincial Park and the surrounding forest in western Manitoba, the purpose of which was to relate bird species and abundance to habitat types as part of an environmental impact assessment.

Before I began working as a consultant, I had little wilderness experience and my overall exposure to "roughing it" was minimal. Walks through the woods had always been along trails and were usually near inhabited areas. Working in the boreal forest entails walking (sometimes tripping and stumbling) along the forest floor. Dense underbrush, tree roots, dead falls, knee-deep mosses in black spruce bogs, large rocks, swamps, rivers, hills, gullies and ravines make the travel difficult, often trying. Trails are few and far between and most are merely narrow animal paths that seldom go in the desired direction.

A typical day begins at 4:00 a.m. with a drive to the starting point. Often however, starting points or tie points, as they are known, are several kilometres into the forest, necessitating a lengthy hike as well. Indicated with flagging

tape, a starting point leads to the survey plots, of which there could be anywhere from 3 to 20, but they usually number 10 to 12. Plots are never less than 250 metres apart to avoid recording the same birds twice. Indeed, they are often over one kilometre apart in order to remain within the desired forest type. At each plot, all birds seen and/or heard within a 100 metre circumference are recorded. In the dense, dark forest few birds are seen in comparison to those heard so I seldom need my binoculars. Listening is carried out for ten minutes at each plot. It is not always a simple task to record every bird heard. Early mornings yield a symphony of sound with 15 or more species and 25 or so



Bur-reed

Wayne Lynch

different individuals singing or calling per plot, depending on the habitat. The route between plots usually is well flagged; however, I am also equipped with the bearings and distances of the plots, a compass, aerial photos, and topographical maps. Along with insect repellent, a hat, good hiking boots and a full water bottle, I have the necessities for work in the bush.

Routes that are fairly close to the road and have short distances between plots are usually completed by 10:00 am; however, many of the survey areas have "killer" walks just to reach the starting point and equally difficult walks between plots. One day I had to survey an area approximately seven kilometres down a trail from the nearest road - a two hour walk. Once into the forest, dense hazel bushes made the trek difficult. Swamps and bogs with above-the-boot water were commonplace; four beaver dams to traverse added a balancing act to my routine. Mosquitos were abundant and a bear plodding towards me at one plot provided excitement, not to mention an adrenaline rush. After the plots were done and I found my way out of the bush, there remained the seven-kilometre hike back to the car. The day was sweltering, black flies and horseflies had replaced the morning's mosquitos and my water supply had all but disappeared. Needless to say, it was an exhausting day.

On one occasion, as I stood quietly at a listening post, a light rain mixed with my insect repellent and trickled down my face into my eyes. The stinging sensation was memorable, to say the least, and I fumbled for a kleenex. While I was fussing about, I heard a branch snap quite close by. I stilled my fumbling to listen. Another snap and then another, and I prayed that it was a small, meek herbivore and not a bear that was making its way toward me. My first inclination was to walk very quickly (well,

okay, I wanted to run) to my next plot, but inadequate flagging on that particular route proved to be a problem. I hauled out my sheet of bearings to find my way and, using my compass, I determined the correct direction, but then remembered I hadn't yet finished the ten minutes allotted to the plot. My eyes were tearing profusely from the D.E.E.T in the insect repellent, my hands were shaking, and a large, unidentified creature was making its way closer and closer. Make noise! That's what one is supposed to do when encountering potentially threatening wildlife. However, it seems unnatural to alert a creature to one's presence when one would rather remain undiscovered. Just as I was about to call out, the shrubs beside me moved and out came the biggest head I'd ever seen - belonging to a fully-antlered moose! From five feet away, he towered over me and I felt my eyes widen in sheer awe at his size - he may as well have been a giraffe. A fleeting thought of the old children's TV show "The Friendly Giant" came to mind: "Look up...waaaay up." Still unaware of my presence, the moose/giraffe continued to feed on the new growth of shrubs and I decided I'd better say something lest he move any closer. "Moose," I called, in a rather weak voice, "Get lost." And he did. I was amazed. He was more afraid than I, and I laughed (at myself). "Ha, it was just a moose", as my hands continued to shake and my heart raced. I finished up the plot with rather shaky printing and moved on to the next, bolstered by the knowledge that moose browse on hazel and perhaps there would be less of it for the remainder of my trek.

A bit later that day, as I finished my last plot, I pulled out my direction sheet to find the way back to my car. The bearing pointed towards the large pond beside me. I followed the flagging tape to an old fallen tree - my bridge across

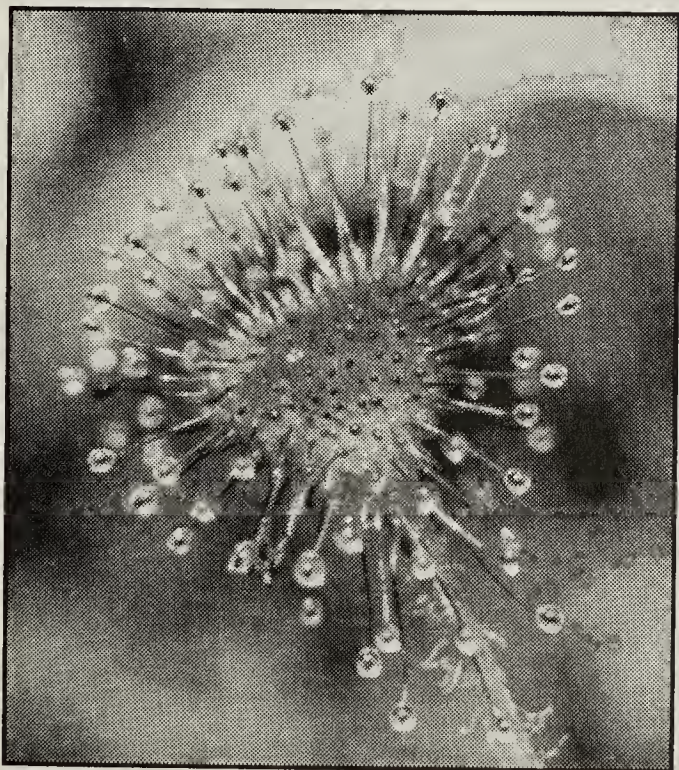
a twenty foot span of the pond. There were no branches to hold on to for balance, so I slowly and cautiously inched my way across. I was never very good on the balance beam when I practised gymnastics as a kid, so what made me think this would be any different? My muddy, wet boots were slippery, as was the moss-covered tree, and I caught my self several times almost slipping off. About half way across, I did slip - right into the waist deep pool. I let out a gasp as the cold water rushed inside my clothes, and a pair of American Wigeon swimming past scolded me for the intrusion. I pointed out to them that I didn't want to be in their pond any more than they wanted me there. I trudged out on the other side, eventually found the trail and slogged my way along. I didn't bother to empty my boots because the mosquitoes were so thick I didn't want to stop; my insect repellent had been washed off in the rain.

Difficulties aside, hikes through the forest often hold pleasant surprises. I have struggled through dense understory for hundreds of metres to suddenly find myself in a beautiful, open

sedge fen with a whole new complex of birds, or a black spruce bog sprinkled with orchids, Pitcher Plants (*Sarracenia purpurea*) and sundew (*Drosera* sp). Walks often took me past large, picturesque lakes complete with the haunting echo of the Common Loon, or through shoulder-high Ostrich Fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*). One very exciting surprise was a black spruce bog filled with Dragon's Mouth (*Arethusa bulbosa*). My partner and I were thigh deep in the bog and my complaints about ruining my new hiking boots were quickly silenced when we saw the plants. They are stunning orchids of bright magenta and because of the very wet habitat, most people are unlikely to encounter them.

Probably the most inspiring aspect of my job is the birdsong. What a thrill to hear the tiny creatures sing their territorial trills as I traverse their domain. Most birders see warblers and other forest-dwelling birds in migration and seldom, if ever, visit the nesting grounds. Being among the birds gives me a brief glimpse into their world and a better understanding of their place in nature.

Most of the birds I have seen and heard seemed unaware of my presence, though I have scared up a few nesting Ruffed Grouse and Ovenbirds. I think they startled me as much as I startled them. I was often scolded for my intrusions as some birds, Solitary Sandpipers in particular, become quite vocal when disturbed on their nesting territory. An encounter that left me feeling elated was a brief interaction with a Ruby-throated Hummingbird. I was quietly standing at a plot, recording birdsongs, when I heard the familiar buzz of wings. I, clad in a bright pink, green and purple windbreaker, must have looked like a giant flower. The little mite probably thought he'd hit the jackpot - the mother of all flowers - when



Round-leafed Sundew

Gary W. Seib

he first approached my pink collar. He hovered in front of me, only centimetres away, for about 10 seconds before realizing I wasn't what I'd first appeared to be. He manoeuvred back onto a branch and continued to watch me for a few minutes, chipping and ticking the whole time.

Along with the pleasure of being among birds, comes the privilege of getting a glimpse of other forest fauna. White-tailed and Mule deer, moose, elk, bear, beaver, fox, coyote, wolf, marten, fisher, badger, even cougar inhabit the forests of the Duck Mountains. I saw most of them while there: deer and moose with their shaky-legged newborns; beaver, slapping their tails on the water at my approach; wolves howling early in the mornings; coyotes and foxes scavenging along the road sides; and bears...lots of bears. My healthy respect for bears (shall I call it fear?) kept me ever alert to their presence. I've had numerous encounters, all uneventful, though two were rather intimidating (for me, not the

bear). Most often, bears retreat when aware of human presence. Two of "my" bears were rather curious and chose to take their sweet time retreating, giving me some anxious moments. In fact, one stalked me for about ten minutes after our initial encounter, most likely to ensure I wasn't a threat and that I was leaving his territory.

All in all, my studies in the forest have been fascinating and fulfilling. I learn something new every day, from the identity of a new plant or an unfamiliar and seldom-used version of a redstart song to the more intricate details of forest ecology. Mere descriptions of the forest cannot do justice to the reality of its beauty. I have often wished I could take people into the forest with me so they too could relish its wonders (and perhaps help fend off the bears). What I have gained through these experiences will always be with me, and though this type of work would not suit most people, those of us able and willing to do it are indeed fortunate.



Black Bear cub

Gary W. Seib