

The View From Heifer Hill—July 2008

It's a Jungle out There

Over the years I have visited a number of the Earth's rainforests, lured by the profusion of life. Those who make such sojourns pay for the thrill of observing this biotic carnival. Heat and humidity drain energy, and plants some armed with thorns and chemical irritants grow in dense tangles that impede movement. Visitors also pay in blood, for in jungles we find ourselves more clearly a notch or two farther down the food chain, with innumerable smaller creatures gnawing on our flesh. If you're thinking this sounds like Vermont in July, well, so do I, and I'll suffer its inconveniences for the thrill of watching this lushest month unfold.

Each evening I continue my walks through the woods to Popple's Pond. Now, instead of the melodies of birds declaring their fitness for mating, I hear the agitated chippings of parents warning me away, and the begging calls of fledglings fluttering in their wake, a few threads of down still sticking clownishly out of their first suit of feathers. My walking pace has slowed, and not just because of the plants that are now knee-high on parts of the path; these plants conceal tiny orange dinosaurs, eastern newts in their juvenile red eft stage, one of our most abundant salamanders.

At the pond, the beavers have changed their activities in ways that make me hope that baby beavers will soon make their debut. Willow no longer greets me when I arrive at the pond. She and Bunchberry remain near the old section of dam they renovated as a nursery. Only later in the evening, between 7:30 and 8:00, will Willow come sit with me and enjoy the beaver treat du jour.

Dusk comes late these days, and it's worth the wait. Twilight in early July cues a cast of performers that are both fascinating and highly observable. At Popple's Pond, the first of these begins warming up just before dusk. One moment the "good night" chirps of robins suggest it's time for



Little Brown Bat

bed, in the next the air vibrates with the strident trills of revelers announcing that it's time to mate. These calls, each a sweet burst of one second's duration, are produced by our loudest and least-observed frog—the gray treefrog. Most of the year these frogs are up in trees where their rough gray skin, with its squiggled pattern of black, blends seamlessly with lichen-encrusted bark. Once the chorus is in full cry these little frogs are not difficult to find, though stealth and patience might be required at first; it takes some time for the frogs' passion to overwhelm their sense of self-preservation.

Treefrogs provide the music, fireflies provide the visual magic. Like the treefrogs' trills, the fireflies' flashings are calculated to seduce. These flashings are also one of the ways we can differentiate firefly species. Although their taxonomy remains murky, entomologists currently list about 22 species of firefly in New England. The fireflies that come out early at Popple's Pond produce a single quick flash of greenish yellow light at irregular intervals. In the meadow halfway home, the fireflies produce a succession of flashes at a leisurely pace, numbering between three and seven flashes, but most often four or five. At home the fireflies flash faster, so quickly that it's hard to count. A few fly high and maintain a single flash for a half second, making a yellow dash against the sky. A friend reports that in one meadow he visits, all of the fireflies rise on a single long flash. In an adjacent meadow,

they all descend. Does each flash pattern represent a different species, or are the patterns influenced by temperature, local dialect, or other variables?

I await the arrival of bats with greatest suspense. I admit that vindictive sentiments toward biting insects play a role in my eagerness. Mostly, however, the sight of bats assures me that they still populate our summer nights. This winter brought the news of devastating and mysterious bat die-offs in many of the caves where these little mammals hibernate.

I have resolved to become a student of bats. Better late than never. There are nine species known to occur in Vermont, two of which are extremely rare and difficult to distinguish from the more common ones. Of the seven that remain, two are abundant, and can be distinguished by size—big brown bats, with a wingspan similar to that of a blackbird, and little brown bats with a wingspan more like that of a chickadee. Still, I find them tricky to tell apart. Bats don't fly like birds. Their wings come forward and closer to their bodies on the upstroke than birds' do, and I find it challenging to get a sense of the wingspan. One evening,

I saw a pale bat that fluttered moth-like above the meadow north of Popple's Pond, matching descriptions of an eastern pipistrelle. I have made progress.

I expect that my bat identification skills would be more advanced by this point in the summer if I had seen more bats. Bats usually abound at beaver ponds. Bugs certainly do. Most nights this summer I have seen no bats at the pond. Some nights I see one or two.

As we find ourselves beginning the return to the dark phase of our trip around the sun, this early part of the journey still holds most of the year's heat, much of the growing, much of the fruiting, and the initiation of new generations of wild life. I look forward to seeing as much of it as I can, especially the young bats joining their mothers on the wing. I hope you'll have opportunities to experience the richness of July—stalk some wily treefrogs, count firefly flashes and bats. For a more peculiar July sight, look for me on the shores of Popple's Pond. I'll be that lump wearing binoculars and swathed in no-see-um netting next to the beaver.