

The View From Heifer Hill—September 2008

The Moose that Stole my Bicycle Helmet

Now that the Earth has reached the point in its annual journey when dusk is brief and arrives ever-earlier, I return from my evening visits to Popple's Pond after dark. To prolong the time that I can see the beavers and other pond activities I ride my bicycle partway to the pond. I lean it against a tree and walk the remaining quarter mile.

I have noticed, after spending many evenings in the same spot, that certain nights seem charged with energy, and I see and hear more animal activity than usual. On one such night, heading home in the dark, I found my bicycle had been tipped over. My helmet was nowhere to be seen. Next to the bike was a fresh moose track. I decided to head home and come back to look for the helmet in daylight. Some 70 feet up the trail, however, I found it. I enjoyed imagining that a rascally moose had trotted off with it, the chin strap clenched in his teeth.

The next day I hiked out with a friend to work on a new trail bridge. As we started across the brook that flows from Popple's Pond, we saw a handsome, velvet-antlered moose standing in the alders upstream. Here I should insert a confession: Over the years I have noticed that many different kinds of animals find certain tones of voice soothing. I don't know why that should be. Why would an animal that makes grunting noises as

a friendly overture find a sing-song human voice relaxing? Still, I have begun experimenting, casually, to test this observation. Therefore, in the interest of science, I said to this moose (in a friendly voice), "Are you, by any chance, the moose that walked off with my bicycle helmet?" The data records that this moose did not slink off, as most do, but ambled toward us. I continued to chat (from what I considered to be a safe place on the bridge over the stream) and the moose continued to walk toward us, pausing to browse along the way. Soon he stood right next to the trail, his great head twenty feet away gazing at us with what I interpreted to be good-natured curiosity. We watched for a while more, and then decided that we needed to get to work, so stepped off the bridge and started toward the moose. At that point the moose opted for discretion over valor and trotted up the trail ahead of us, pausing to look back a couple of times. He soon veered off the trail and watched us pass.

I like to think that this is the moose that I had encountered on the dark trail on my return from the pond on a couple of occasions. Though too dark to see both times, I could hear the moose moving on the trail ahead of me, and I always talked to him. Could this be the same moose wondering what I looked like in daylight? Fanciful, I know.

On my walk to the pond the evening of the moose encounter, however, I noticed a couple of things that I had missed on the previous trip. One was a bear scat that I must have ridden my bicycle past before. After I parked my bike and continued along the muddy section of trail, I found the bear's tracks. They were of the right age to make the bear a suspect in the helmet heist. I examined my helmet more closely, and sure enough found indentations that conformed to a bear's dentition. To tell the truth, I had my doubts about the moose all along. First of all, the tracks were slim evidence, there are always moose tracks all on the trail. Secondly, I don't know that moose have enough rascal in them for such activities. Bears,



on the other hand, are notorious rascals, and are especially interested in plastic objects. I encourage you to examine any plastic jugs you find out in the woods—old gas and oil jugs left behind by loggers—chances are good that you'll find them punctured by bears' teeth.

My mind is often on bears this time of year. They have recently entered their phase of fattening for the winter. During the next couple of months they will feed almost around the clock, hoping to double their weight. They need to consume the caloric equivalent of 15 to 20 pints of Ben& Jerry's a day to meet their goal. In our region, beechnuts are the crop that makes this feat possible. Because they need to feed efficiently, and because there is little cover in a fall beech stand, bears tend to congregate and feed only in remote stands. I am in the habit of checking beech trees for bear claw marks wherever I hike. I have found scarred trees only in isolated wild locations.

This is a great fall for bears to fatten. Not only are beech trees producing nuts, but the cherries,

apples, and elderberries have outdone themselves. Such a year of bounty means that more bears will make it through the winter in good condition, and that the pregnant females will produce cubs, and probably twins (maybe even triplets).

As for the beavers, they seem to be enjoying an extended summer. I have seen no evidence of preparation for winter yet. No mud has been pushed up onto any of their lodges, no branches have been cached for winter feeding. Auntie Bunchberry, the young beaver that did most of the childcare this summer, has disappeared. She probably decided the time had come to begin raising her own children. Ducky, the baby beaver, and her parents Willow and Popple continue to provide regular evening entertainment. As I ride my bike to the pond each evening, however, I hope it will be one of those exciting nights when wild things happen.