

Wildlife Have to Survive All Year

On the morning after our recent snowfall, I spent some time looking out the windows watching the birds and the squirrels and the deer. It occurred to me that the lives of wildlife are a lot more difficult than we usually think about. All of our wildlife friends have to survive the worst weather conditions in all seasons.

Wildlife have to survive not only during times of good weather and abundant food, but they also have to survive in times of the worst weather and little or no food. And they have to dodge their enemies not just most of the time, or even 99% of the time, but 100% of the time. And they have to do this not only as adults but as babies and juveniles as well.

Animals that eat vegetation have to survive not just during growing seasons in good rainfall years, but in seasons of no growth and droughts. Insect eaters likewise can't survive only on insects during times of insect abundance, but they have to survive times when insect populations are low or non-existent. Seed eaters have to find food all year long, not just in the summer and fall when most plants produce seeds.

Good habitat for wildlife must provide all the essential elements wildlife need, food, water, shelter, and a place to raise their young year round. Or, as Leopold said, wildlife cannot live in habitat that provides "only kitchens or only bedrooms" anymore that we could.

Some birds solve the problem of there being no winter food in one area by migrating to areas that do provide the essentials of life. But not all birds migrate. The only local mammals that migrate are bats, and even those bats that do not migrate south in the winter hibernate. They are the only local mammals that I know of that hibernate. So everything else has to survive winters by continuing to find food, even in inclement weather. Many animals such as skunks and raccoons will sleep through very cold spells in a den. Armadillos are sometimes killed by long cold spells.

Of course we don't often have enough snow to be any kind of factor for wildlife, at least for very long, but I did notice a couple of things this morning before the snow melted. The one or two inches of snow on the platform bird-feeder prevented our local cardinals, titmice, chickadees and house finches from getting any sunflower seeds. The second thing is that the birds and squirrels were a lot more visible to predators against the snow than they usually are against the grass or tree branches.

I am always in awe of birds being able to survive long cold winter nights. When you think of a bird that is only 2 inches tall and weighs only an ounce or so, maintaining its body temperature over a cold windy night, that is remarkable.

And it is not just cold weather that challenges wildlife. Summer droughts may dry up water holes and reduce the amount of vegetation, which reduces seed production as well as insect production, all affecting bird survival.

What may not be obvious to us is that in times of severe weather or reduced food sources, populations of various species decline. In times of abundant vegetation, herbivore populations tend to increase, followed by the populations of predators. And the reverse is also true; when prey species decline in numbers, predator numbers will fall as well.

Each species in each habitat likely has a limiting factor that determines the limits of their population. It may be winter feed, or water, or cover from predators, or lack of suitable areas to raise their young, but whatever it is determines the population of that species in that habitat. For quail, for instance, a habitat without areas of bare ground between clumps of grass will limit the ability of their newly-hatched chicks (only about 2 inches tall) from moving about and finding insects. For squirrels, long open distances between trees where they are more vulnerable to predators will limit their population.

We probably don't know enough to always know what this or that species needs most, or what is most limiting their numbers, which is why we need to work to provide the most diverse healthy habitat possible for all critters.

Until next time...

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