

Newport Forest

Monday February 14 2011

2:45 - 8:15 pm

Weather: precip. 9 mm; RH 87%; BP 100.6 kPa; cld/sn; N \leq 40 kmh; T -1° C

Purpose: Owling

Participants: Kee, Darren, Glen Jacobs

My heart sank as I surveyed the expanse of snow in the Upper Meadow, traversed only by the tracks of Darren's jeep. He and his nephew Manny had visited last week to pioneer the track and clear some of the snow around the trailer. As the tires sank a foot or more down through the heavy, wet snow to frozen ground, I could feel the drag. To stop was to die, I thought. So I kept going. Amazingly I made it all the way to the trailer.

I was just on the verge of realizing that I would never get out until April, when I spotted a possum in the middle of the road in front of the trailer deck, digging in the snow. Holeeee! It spotted me and trundled unhurriedly under the trailer. It seemed scrawny, so I threw a bunch of kibble under the trailer. Nocturnal animals showing up in broad daylight are usually in some kind of trouble. At this time of year, the trouble is usually starvation. Colder temperatures cause a mammal to burn up more of its fat reserves, reducing the insulation and accelerating the starvation process.

I hooked up a new propane bottle, started the stove, and cleaned up the trailer. By now the clouds had cleared as a new high entered the area. I changed the cam card, and waited for Darren and Glen to show up. They came in around five

After warming up in the trailer (now a balmy 15 ° C), we walked down to the river, expending the same energy as if we had walked a kilometre. At the river, Darren drew our attention to a large, brown eagle circling over an open area downstream. "Is that a Golden?" I asked. It certainly seemed large enough. "Nope. The Golden has a white patch at the wrist. That's an immature baldie." We took photos of ourselves in twos to commemorate the achievement of actually getting to the river, then returned to the trailer for hot tea. On the way, we spotted the possum's tracks coming out of the Blind Creek Forest.

Darkness fell and we dined on hot sandwiches, juice, and hot tea. I played the owl tape (quietly) so that we could familiarize ourselves with the calls. It was not the best time to be owling, as a) it was a bit early in the season, b) wind inhibits owls, and c) it was getting colder by the minute as the air temperature plunged toward what would be an overnight low of - 17° C.

Nevertheless, the wind had died down, so we went out and played the Screech Owl tape first (on advice from Winnie Wake). We got an answer, albeit a faint one, from deep in the Fleming Creek Forest, down on the floodplain. Then the weirdness started. (Darren and Glen are my witnesses.) I lined the tape up for the Great Horned Owl calls and was about to push the play button, when a Great Horned Owl began to call from the far end of the Blind Creek Forest. “Whoohoo-hoo”. So it was *we* who answered and not the owl. We had clearly entered the Twilight Zone.

We tried a few more owls, such as the Saw-whet and the Barred Owl (faint hope there), as well as the Eastern Short-eared Owl. Nada. I was becoming increasingly worried about getting out of the property, so we cleaned up, and loaded the van. Darren has a 4WD Jeep Rubicon fitted with giant snow tires with big lugs.

He turned the jeep around and headed out, me following in his tracks. Unfortunately, the plunging temperatures had hardened the snow crust and the van kept riding up on it, being a low-slung affair. I got stuck three times this way in the process of trying to follow Darren out, so he suggested a tow and that’s what we did. I was both amazed and grateful as we climbed even the big hill to the Upper Meadow. That, among other things, is why Darren is our top Steward!

birds: (5 - not our typical winter list)

American Crow (HBF); Bald Eagle (TR); Eastern Screech Owl (BCF); Great Horned Owl (BCF/W); White-breasted Nuthatch (Tr)

Snow Notes:

1. Unless the snow melts away very gradually over the coming weeks, we can expect a major flood to inundate the property, as it does every few years.
2. The size of the local snow-pack (flood or no flood) foretells a good frog chorus and full vernal ponds, come March
3. The precipitation to date (2011) is nearing the 100 mm mark (liquid equivalent). Another 50 mm by month’s end will foretell a non-drought year, according to past records.

IMAGES:



The river has opened downstream, where the eagle was probably fishing.



Glen Jacobs (left) and his nephew Darren (right) look out over the river. Being one of the last people who can speak Minsee (Munsee) Delaware, Glen's services are much in demand, from private tutoring to the movie industry. He was the language coach for the movie, Last of the Mohicans.

Darren is smiling because his uncle has just cracked a joke.



Coming out: Only an idiot would snap a picture while being towed. . .