

## Winter on the Meadow

I stayed up most of the night feeding wood to our stoves and reading and writing. Then I slept until mid-morning. Laura and Amanda and Juniper were working at classes when I got up, and the sun shone brightly on the snow-covered meadow. I ate a quiet breakfast, dressed for skiing, and struck off across the meadow, full of energy and curious about what the other inhabitants of the valley were doing.

Three ravens stood close together out on the meadow and provided an image of strong contrasts, blackest of blacks on clean white snow. They had probably found something to eat, and when they finished, they flew up from the snow into the timber.

Most birds leave before the heavy snows come and the coldest weather starts. Ravens stay. They eat whatever comes their way, carrion, voles, I don't know what all. They aren't good at answering questions. They just fly over on their way somewhere, and sometimes I see one or several of them on the snow out on the meadow. Some days, I hear their croaking comments up in the timber.

Owls and hawks stay. This morning, a red-tailed hawk sits on a post of an old hay yard. I had planned to ski along the edge of the bench ground, but I turned and headed toward the timber. I don't want to put the hawk to flight if I can help it. All my busy motion is for fun. The hawk flies for survival, and I don't want to add to its work on a cold winter day.

Halfway to the timber, I find a small hole in the snow, tiny paw prints around it. Five feet from the hole, wing marks in the snow. End of the trail. Voles stay active under the snow all winter. They eat myriad tunnels through the grass roots. One of them tunneled through the snow to the surface here and ran around long enough for an owl or a hawk or a raven to make a meal of it.

I wonder why voles tunnel to the surface. They don't need to. Thousands of them live on the meadow, but I find only a few tunnels up. Maybe some of them get claustrophobia. Maybe some of them volunteer to help the predators make it through the winter. Thousands of voles live on the meadow. Only a few predators include the meadow in their ranging for food. Doesn't all of nature support the survival of life first, survival of the species next, and survival of the individual last?

A yellow and black salamander made its way across the snow on a 20-degree morning. According to what I read, it's supposed to be tucked in under leaves or roots, living at a very slow pace until spring.

Small black spiders are going somewhere across the surface of the snow. This is the first time I've seen them this year. Many places where I stop and look, I see one or several. What are they doing? Where are they going? Where do they get their energy? What do they eat out here on all this snow?

I'm interested in the answers to these questions but not nearly as interested as I am in the questions themselves. I wouldn't let seeking the answers distract me from seeing how many more questions I can find on the meadow. If I had followed the salamander all morning, to discover why it was out on the snow, I wouldn't have seen the spiders. I wouldn't have seen five more tunnels where voles became food for a hawk or an owl or a raven. Can I tell from the marks in the snow which bird took the vole? I have clues, but I don't have a definite answer.

What do the coyotes eat all winter? The deer move down to lower country before the snow comes. I think the elk move down before the snow gets really deep, but I'm not sure of that. Doc said he saw some of them yarded up in an aspen grove up the ridge from here four years ago. Last year, when three feet of snow covered the meadow, two cow elk and two calves came down the meadow along the edge of the bench ground the other side of the river. It was heavy going, plowing their way through deep snow, and they came only three miles in an hour. Most winters, their tracks tell me that the elk cross the meadow, going their daily routes, until the snow is one and a half or two feet deep. Then I see no more sign until spring.

The coyotes reduce their ranging on the meadow when the snow gets deep. They eat voles. They listen, then thrust their heads clear down through the snow to snap up the small creatures. But it must be impossible to do that when a crust develops or when the snow gets too deep. They eat squirrels, snowshoe hares, and grouse, but the population of all those is sparse here in the valley. At least four coyotes live in the timber bordering our part of the meadow. It would take a lot of meat to keep them all healthy all winter. They sing over there most nights. They aren't starving.

I skied down the steep bank onto the ice on the river and then down the river. Beavers winter in tunnels dug into the banks. They don't build houses in the river. They do build dams, in spring and summer, when the water is low. The rampaging waters of spring carry those away, but by that time,

the willows have started their spring growth, and the beavers don't have to depend on food stored under the ice on the river.

An incautious beaver, winter frolicking, could be a coyote's food, though the beaver might hold its own in a fight. Do they fight predators? I don't know.

Bobcat tracks. I knew it was time to head back for lunch, because the first thing I thought of when I saw cat tracks was, once again, how can it get enough food to make it through a long, cold winter with three feet of snow on the ground?

Sidestepping up the bank from the river, thinking about a grilled-cheese sandwich, with garlic sliced thinly onto the cheese before it's cooked, and carrots, I understood that there is one simple answer to all the questions: God, nature, the Earth, the life force works out every function of life in balance and perfect harmony.

My perspective is broader if I don't try to answer every question, don't try to find an explanation for every action or every image I see.

Conclusions, I think, occur only in human minds. Out there, on the meadow, in the timber, the black spiders, the coyotes, the bobcats and all their various prey and all their prey's food sources, in the world of nature in balance, there are no conclusions. The only state of mind is the eternal life force.

Amanda and Juniper and Laura finish school for the day when I get to the house. I help fix lunch, and we eat. Amanda says, I like to ski. Can we all go skiing?"

"Sure." We go out and ski down the hill north of the barn. Juniper and Amanda tire of the skis. I make a small effort to push it. "If you practice more, you'll get better at it, and you'll enjoy it more."

'Do we have to?"

"No, you don't have to, but why don't you try one more run down the hill?"

Halfway down the hill, Amanda steps off her skis. She says. "I don't see the advantage of going on skis. Look. I can walk on the crust, and it's easier to walk than ski." Juniper leaves her skis behind and rolls down the hill in the snow. She stands up and stays on top of the crust.

I say, "You two are lighter than I am. I break through the crust. But one advantage of skis is they're faster."

Amanda says, "Are you sure about that?"

"You go on foot, and I'll ski, and I'll race you to the river, and we'll see."

She's off and running before I'm ready, which is okay, because I planned to give her a head start, so I won't beat her too badly, so she won't quit early in discouragement. However,

her lead continues to grow.

I shouldn't have allowed her a head start, because I reach the bottom of the hill and ski hard, and I don't gain much on her. I didn't realize her short legs could move so fast. She stops on the bank above the river and turns to greet me. Her face glows in victory. "What took you so long? I thought you said skis were faster than running."

"I thought they were. I had no idea you could run so fast. You must have eaten so many carrots for lunch they turned you into a rabbit."

Laura and Juniper join us. Juniper asks, "Is the ice thick enough to walk on?"

"I think so. I skied on the river earlier. Some places, there's open water along the bank. Just watch for places like that."

We walk up and down on the surface of the river. Juniper and Amanda get up on a high bank and slide like beavers down onto the river ice again and again.

We left our skis and walked through dense willow bush, looking for beaver sign, but they hadn't been out. I said, "Maybe they don't come out all winter. They store food by pushing willows into the river bottom, so they don't need to come out."

Laura said, "Neither do we. We push food into the cupboard in the house, so we could just stay in, but it's fun to be out."

There was no wind. The sun shone warmly. We left part of our outer clothing hanging in the willows and wandered across the meadow.

We saw several kinds of tracks, three ravens, and two hawks. I showed everyone where the vole had tunneled to the surface and provided food for a predatory bird. I said, "Owls' wing feathers have soft extensions on the ends of the barbs that form the vanes, so they can fly quietly. I think Ravens have the most distinct vanes, the hardest vanes. You can hear their wings against the air from quite a ways away. I think hawks are somewhere in between. If I was a good-enough tracker, I could tell you which bird caught and ate the vole. See out here, where the wings barely brushed the snow? It looks like the feathers were soft, so maybe it was an owl, but I think I'd have to see each bird take a vole on snow and look over the marks they left before I began to be confident about identifying them from marks in the snow."

We didn't declare an end to our afternoon on the snow and the river. The sun, early to set that far north, stood an hour above the horizon when direction toward the house turned one of us toward defined motion, and the rest followed. We gathered our possessions and walked up the hill, drifting

through sunlight and odd swirls of conversation, pleased with our outdoor winter activities together and pleased to be headed home, where the stoves still cast warmth through the house.