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Birds Hit the Road

Many birds, especially the winter finches, are attracted to the sand and salt spread out on the highway for winter road maintenance. Salt is a rare treat and an essential mineral for wildlife, so they will take it when they can get it. Birds consume sand and gravel to help them with digestion. Birds have no teeth

and do not always break up their food into little pieces, so they use their "mechanical stomach" or gizzard, which grinds up the food with the help of the grit consumed on the road. If you see birds on the road, honk your car horn to alert them – it just might save their lives!



Winter in Algonquin

As you may have already discovered, Algonquin Park can be a fascinating place to visit in the winter. You may not be aware, however, of the many different recreational and educational opportunities that are available to you. For more detailed information on winter activities in Algonquin, pick up a copy of the new Algonquin Winter Guide, available at the East and West Gates, and the Visitor Centre.

www.algonquinpark.on.ca



Join us for Algonquin Provincial Park's 4th Annual

Winter in the Wild Festival

February 14, 2015 • Family Day Weekend

All activities during the festival are free with the purchase of a valid Park Permit with the exception of food.



Winter in Algonquin is unforgettable and Winter in the Wild highlights the best of what the season has to offer the whole family.



Join us this
Family Day Weekend
for

Snowshoeing

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and more...**

Events are subject to change.
Please check online for a current
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*Make memories in
Algonquin this Family
Day weekend.*



The Visitor Centre offers **FREE WiFi** internet access ...and while there, don't forget to check out The Friends of Algonquin Park Bookstore and Nature Shop, or the Sunday Creek Café.

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A Natural and Cultural History Digest



Six Days in March

by David LeGros



Finding a carcass in late winter can mean the difference between life and death for hungry scavengers.

Algonquin's winters are pretty tough. For nearly 5 months, snow and frigid temperatures blanket the landscape. The deep snow, cold, and lack of food make many animals very vulnerable during this season. Some animals, like the Black Bear hibernate to avoid the shortage of food. Others, like many of Algonquin's breeding birds, migrate south. Animals that feed on plants often resort to eating bark and twigs, as do Moose, White-tailed Deer and Snowshoe Hare. For the meat-eaters, getting around can also be tough, and prey is often scarce. For most wildlife, finding enough food just to stay alive is often a struggle, and some don't make it to spring. Although we know these struggles happen, we

rarely get to witness them. However, last winter we did have the chance to see a procession of wildlife attend a carcass.

During the late winter of 2014, a White-tailed Deer was hit by a car. We took this opportunity to place the deer carcass in the Sunday Creek Bog about 200 m in front of the Visitor Centre, so we might observe wildlife feeding on it. The carcass was placed in the bog on March 11 and what followed was an intense six days of scavengers feeding until there was nothing left. We monitored the carcass from the Visitor Centre using a spotting scope and kept detailed records of the wildlife observed. We also installed an automated trail camera



mounted on a nearby tree. This unblinking observer could capture images day and night without worry of scaring off wildlife.

The deer carcass was placed in the bog in early afternoon and it did not take long before the Common Ravens located it by sight. Within moments of the first raven landing on it, there were three ravens busily probing and pecking at the deer. The carcass was frozen solid, and the thick hair and skin prevented them from ripping any flesh from the body. By dusk, another scavenger had arrived, a Red Fox. Under the cover of darkness, the fox carefully inspected the area, sniffing the snow to confirm that it was the first mammalian scavenger to arrive. After making sure it was alone, it soon began chewing on the hind quarters of the deer. Within an hour, another fox had arrived, but maintained a cautious distance and only watched as the first fox continued to feed. By sunrise, the foxes had left and shortly after, the ravens returned. This time, they were rewarded. The holes the fox had chewed into the hind quarters of the deer allowed them to

peck and pull at strands of flesh.

In the days that followed, many ravens and foxes appeared at the carcass to feed. However, other curious visitors arrived but did not sample the coveted carrion. A Wild Turkey investigated the carcass briefly before continuing through the snowy bog. A Blue Jay also had a quick look, perhaps on its way to the sunflower seed and cut corn at the Visitor Centre bird feeder. Strangely, no Gray Jays appeared to have found the carcass. Gray Jays will often remove bits of fat and flesh, taken between feedings by the ravens and the foxes, but they will also grab tufts of hair in late winter to line their nests. Gray Jays are among the earliest nesters in Algonquin, often incubating eggs while snow is falling and night-time temperatures are -20°C. Other scavengers, like the American Marten, did not make appearances at the carcass either. Marten populations were thought to be low in the winter of 2014, part of natural fluctuation in numbers. The deep snow and severe cold was also suspected to have kept them in dense forest cover – for an animal with short legs, deep and



A curious Wild Turkey watches two Common Ravens feed.



Bald Eagles will consume carrion if they can get it.

fluffy snow makes travel very difficult.

Perhaps the most appreciated visitor to the carcass was a Bald Eagle, which arrived in late afternoon of the third day. This mature eagle likely circled overhead, and then landed on the deer, scaring off the ravens. Scenes like this one played out in the early parts of the 20th century in Algonquin, where Park Rangers would lay out carcasses and baits to attract wolves. They didn't want to get a better look or snap some photos; they were trying to increase White-tailed Deer numbers by killing off predators—the meat was laced with strychnine. The poison did kill many wolves, but it also poisoned many other scavengers, including eagles. Later on, in the 1950's, the pesticide DDT was being used extensively in agriculture to control noxious insects. The pesticide worked very well and killed countless insects, but it contaminated many food webs—with birds of prey being near the top, poisoning adults, chicks and eggs alike. Ultimately, the pesticide was banned in the 1970s, but it was



Something has startled this Red Fox off the deer carcass, perhaps the Wild Turkeys in the background.



Not even the snow and cold will keep scavengers from a potential meal.

too late for many birds of prey. For many years, Bald Eagles were an uncommon sight in Algonquin, but in recent decades they have made a come-back, and now it is not unusual to see Bald Eagles here throughout the year.

A heavy snow began to fall on the deer in the afternoon of the fourth day and into the night, but this did not deter the foxes as they continued to wrestle small pieces of meat from the deer. By dawn of the fifth day, a different animal showed up. An Eastern Wolf had begun to nose around, and cautiously crept up to the deer. It did not sit down to gorge as one might think it would, but it began pulling the carcass away. It would often stop, ears upright, looking toward the woods at the edge of the bog, tail between its legs—a submissive posture. Perhaps this was not its territory—and by rights, not its meal. It did begin to eat, but while doing so, dragged the deer out of view of the camera, seriously limiting the capture of photos. By the sixth day, the carcass had been dragged far from the

camera location. Using binoculars, we were able to detect that not much remained of the carcass. The decision was made to retrieve the camera and inspect the scene.

The bog was covered in animal tracks; fox and wolf tracks radiating to the centre where the carcass was, like the spokes of a wheel. Trails crisscrossed the deep snow with ease while I fumbled in snowshoes. Upon arriving at the site, I was pleased to see the camera still there. Where the deer had been deposited was completely trampled with tracks and even a deep hole dug into the snow.

Clumps of deer hair, a bit of blood and some scent markers were seen on the snow. The wolf or more likely, wolves, had dragged the carcass over 100 m to the edge of Sunday Creek. Large paw prints led the way to what remained of the deer. A few pieces of cracked leg bone, no bigger than a thumb were found on the snow, still bright pink inside. All that was left of the deer was just the guts containing plant material in various stages of digestion, destined to become droppings. This was not consumed by scavengers; however the membrane of the intestine had been neatly removed and eaten.



Tracks leave a record of the comings and goings of wildlife, like the Eastern Wolf.

While reflecting on how completely the scavengers had consumed the deer and how important finding carrion is for their survival I was interrupted by a distant wail. There was a pack of wolves on the far edge of the bog in the thick spruce forest. At least two animals howled, and I knew it was time to head back to the Visitor Centre and not disturb them further.



The Eastern Wolf's initial visit to the carcass.

Once the pictures had been uploaded, it became apparent that the carcass was even busier than we thought. A total of 5263 photos were taken over the course of 6 days, and most of them have wildlife visible in the shot. Ravens and foxes were the most common visitors. Scavengers attended the carcass around the clock, even in the dark and bitter cold. Winter is hard on most wildlife, and some don't see the next spring. The death of one animal does however provide food for many other hungry animals, which, without carrion might starve. We can think of an animal that has died in the cold as a gift for others rather than a tragedy. As we think of the winter ahead, maybe with dismay, we can be reminded that winter often brings us together – and carrion brings wildlife together.