

Mental rewards of walking in nature surpass benefits of mere physical exercise

by Ted Bailey

I consider myself fortunate and am extremely grateful that I have the chance to walk daily amongst natural settings during the winter months.

And I am fully aware that most people do not have this winter opportunity. I did not have such an opportunity myself for many winters but yearned for it frequently while I spent seemingly increasing proportions of each winter indoors in an office setting. I viewed, sometimes with envy, those few privileged people that I would sometimes encounter beginning or returning from a midday winter walk on the Keen Eye Trail around the refuge office.

So after all those winters of confined days in the office, the time I now get to spend walking outdoors each winter day is especially rewarding.

Although I also walk daily for physical exercise, I consider the mental benefits of walking and experiencing nature to far exceed the physical benefits. And I am fortunate by circumstances to be able to enjoy wild nature close to home.

My hope at the beginning of a walk is to become so immersed in my immediate surroundings—the sights and sounds of nature—that all my previously acquired images of a distant war with the loss of lives, of disease, hunger, accidents and other misfortunes of people throughout the world, so prevalent in each day's news, will somehow magically vanish for a brief period and I will reside only and fully in my immediate and natural surroundings.

I vary my route from day to day but still, because of limitations of local geography, find myself repeating the same route every few days. But this does not deter me from each walk, for even if in the same physical space, each walk brings new and unexpected experiences.

I am satisfied if I only see a familiar bird. Over the winter, I have become acquainted with the wide-ranging haunts of a family of four Canada jays. I now know the local flight paths of ravens and the favorite perching trees of bald eagles. There are the anticipated pairs of boreal and black-capped chickadees foraging high in certain trees overhead. Periodically, I am

treated to a pair of northern three-toed woodpeckers feeding on the larvae of bark beetles in several dying but once majestic white spruce trees.

More recently, they have begun to establish their territories by loudly and repeatedly pecking on the most resonating trees. I pass by decayed, standing snags of trees with cavities that I make a mental note to check again in the spring for evidence of nesting birds.

Although uncommon this winter, flocks of redpolls sometimes appear, and I watch them busily extract tiny birch seeds high in the trees above my head. Also high overhead, white-winged crossbills deftly pry open cones and extract seeds of white spruce.

On three days I was rewarded by seeing brown creepers, an elusive species, feeding on the trunks of birch trees, carefully exploring each tiny nook and crevice in the loose folds of bark for hidden spiders and insects. Watching brown creepers is a rare pleasure because they are seen so infrequently.

Although the sky, clouds, trees and birds sufficiently provide temporary relief from the gloomy current events during such walks, I am always on the alert for the more rare signs of a furry wild mammal.

Usually their passing leaves only traces in the snow, and there were few traces during this atypical winter. Earlier, when we had a few periods of new snowfall, I was reminded of the reasons why living in Alaska is unique: one night a brown bear had walked in my tracks made the previous day.

Another time a coyote crossed my tracks twice in a single night; a mink and an ermine crossed my tracks numerous times in their perpetual quest for small mammals under the snow.

The previous year, a lynx passed through the area—but only once during the entire winter.

Although it is sometimes difficult each day for us to put aside the mental images accumulated from watching or imagined while listening to news reports or reading newspapers, those precious moments when all such thoughts have temporarily vanished and our thoughts are concentrated only on the present and nat-

ural surroundings often help us confirm an appreciation of the unique value of our lives, of all life, including those of other creatures.

For those who are unable to experience nature by walking from your own backdoor, consider walking the Keen Eye Trail at refuge headquarters at the top of Ski Hill Road or elsewhere on the refuge.

Having the opportunity to freely walk anywhere you please is one of the many benefits of having a wildlife refuge next door. For those like myself, who may prefer walking without the benefits of trails, the refuge is only minutes away and you can spend minutes or hours walking dependent only on your own

need for solitude and reflection and your personal quest to contemplate on the significance of life that can often be found in nature around us.

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