

Plant and animal life flourishes in wetlands this spring and summer

by Ted Bailey

Plant and animal life in the wetlands and elsewhere in our neighborhood flourished this spring and summer, especially compared to last year. If you remember, during the 2002-2003 winter we had little snowfall and high winds that drove temperatures down to an estimated -40°F during March 2003. Those cold temperatures combined with the lack of deep snow that normally provides protective insulation for plants and small animals killed the exposed stems of many evergreen plants, such as Labrador tea and bog rosemary in wind-exposed wetlands, and browned lowbush cranberry and club mosses in forested areas.

In contrast, this last winter brought us above-average snowfall, which arrived early in the winter. It not only provided adequate insulation all winter by deeply burying low-lying plants, it also provided abundant water during spring breakup. And we were fortunate to have an unusual rain lasting nearly three days in late May. All of these factors combined to provide ideal growing conditions for plants and for the animals feeding on them this spring and summer.

More than any other recent spring I can remember many plants in wetlands areas prospered. Early, in May before most annual plants had developed green leaves, numerous white, bell-shaped flowers of the leatherleaf shrubs gave many wetland areas the appearance of a very late scattered snowfall. On the heels of the blooming leatherleaf came a multitude of tiny pink flowers of the bog rosemary. Wetlands areas in our neighborhood were literally pink as thousands of blossoms burst forth in late May and early June. The white blossoms of Labrador tea and cottongrass and the tiny pink flowers of bog cranberries soon followed these in sequence. And in forested areas, unlike last summer, numerous pink blossoms indicate we will be able to harvest lowbush cranberries again this year.

The abundance of standing water was also a haven for mosquitoes, a negative aspect—from perhaps only our human viewpoint—of an exceptionally wet spring. As temperatures rose and remained high during the mostly cloud-free days of June and July, mosquitoes seemed to reach record levels. However by late July

continual high summer temperatures and lack of rainfall dried many of the smaller open bodies of water and disrupted the mosquito life cycle.

The abundance of mosquitoes may have also contributed to an abundance of one of their predators, the dragonfly. Dragonflies seemed particularly plentiful this year. I encountered them everywhere from sea level to the alpine areas. The combination of multitudes of mosquitoes, midges and dragonflies also apparently combined to make it a good year for raising swallows. At times the air over several nearby lakes seemed to be filled with tree and violet-green swallows plucking insects out of the air.

A pair of tree swallows fledged at least three, perhaps even four, young from a nest box near our home. Fledging this many young was another sign that life was prospering and that food for swallows was abundant. I lost count of the number of dragonflies the adults brought back to feed their young and could not begin to see the numerous smaller insects they returned with. The young fledged the second week of July and suddenly it seemed that within days all of the swallows in our neighborhood had vanished, not to be seen again.

Within 24 hours of the tree swallows fledging, at least two fledging red-breasted nuthatches left the protection of their snug tree cavity in a decayed birch tree in our back yard. I had earlier wondered whether the nuthatches would return to use the same nesting cavity they spent so much time and effort excavating in the spring of 2003. They did. And to add to the list of flourishing wildlife, I regularly saw snipe, greater yellowlegs and a least sandpiper displaying in neighboring wetlands. Finally, three adult cow moose frequenting the same wetlands had calves; two had singles and the other had twins.

Since about mid-July I have seen large mixed flocks of birds passing through the area, mixed in the sense that a single flock of birds may contain many different species of both resident and migratory birds. Some of these flocks must have numbered well over a hundred individuals. The birds in these mixed flocks are ex-

tremely difficult to count because they are constantly feeding on the move, flitting from the ground-to-bushes, bush-to-bush, and treetop-to-treetop. Members of the same species also do a lot of pursuing each other twisting and darting among the limbs and leaves of trees. Such flocks may be visible for only 5-20 minutes and then they are gone and the forest is silent again.

In one mixed flock that I recently observed along the Centennial Trail near refuge headquarters I tallied at least twelve species moving together through the trees. There were numerous dark-eyed juncos, ruby-crowned kinglets, yellow-rumped warblers, boreal and black-capped chickadees accompanied by at least one pine siskin, Swainson's thrush, hermit thrush, varied

thrush, hairy woodpecker, brown creeper, and a red-breasted nuthatch. These mixed flocks are a pleasure to observe. Seldom does one get to see so many species in one place in such a short period of time. I have never before seen - but perhaps only never had the time to notice - such large mixed flocks of birds. Perhaps they too are a sign that life has flourished elsewhere during the spring and summer of 2004.

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