

Winter Walks

By Gloria Hildebrandt

IN WINTER the highlight of my typical day is a midday walk around the back of my property with my dogs. This is the warmest time of the day and usually the brightest as well. I like getting fresh air and sunlight as a break. As long as I'm dressed properly, I enjoy being out in winter. I dress for function, not fashion. I need big tall boots that keep my feet warm and dry. Long johns under my pants help. A long parka with hood or my old knitted hat with scarf attached means there is no place for wind or snow to hit my bare neck or go down my back. Proper mittens, sometimes one pair inside another, are important. Icy fingers and

toes can be a dangerous sign of impending frostbite.

A winter walk is usually free from thoughts of outdoor work. No plants to pull out, branches to move, bridges to repair. Unless a tree has fallen down. Winter work tends to be close to the house: firewood to bring inside, the front porch and walk to be shovelled, as well as the large back verandah and herb garden paths. Actually, I can ignore the verandah and paths, but I like them better cleared of snow. Sitting on the long rear verandah can feel like being at a ski lodge, and my dogs like to mill around on the paths through the herb garden. What can be hard work is just walking through the snow if it's deep, if there's been no trail broken.

Snowshoes make it easier to get around, and after they've packed down the trails, I can walk there in my boots alone. The dogs use the trails, and I've noticed that wild animals do, too. Signs of wildlife can be easier to see in winter. Deer, rabbits, grouse, Great Blue Heron, racoons and moles can all leave clear tracks. I can't distinguish the tracks of dogs, coyotes and foxes, though.

Winter birds that I can often see in the forest away from the bird feeders include Chickadees, Blue Jays, crows, Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers. I come across fresh gashes in trees with piles of big wood chips below, made by Pileated Woodpeckers, but I rarely see the birds themselves. The heron stalks the open end of the pond where some springs are, and it will fly up and away with a terrific squawk. Its three-toed tracks often lead to the water's edge and I have seen it all through winter.

Sitting in Silence

I enjoy sitting on the bench at the pond where the sun can hit my face. On a bright cold day the sky is brilliant blue. I never want to bash swiftly through natural spaces. I like to be there for a while, taking in the silence, the smells, the views. I may have to clear the benches of snow and ice with my walking stick.

A stick is particularly useful in winter, for testing the depth of snow or water, turning things over, clearing an overhanging branch of snow, drawing smiley faces... and especially for helping you get up if you've fallen and there is no tree nearby. When you're in the snow up to your armpits, a sturdy walking stick can support you in getting on your feet.

Before the trails have been packed down, when the snow is deep, the dogs can be up to their "armpits." As they churn through the snow, the heat of their bodies can create clumps of icy snow in their fur. They can get snowballs on their paws and ice between their toes. My small dog Thomas often stops to lick the ice off his paws, not realizing that he's making it worse by making them warm and damp.

Cozy House

Coming home after the 45-minute walk is pleasant, with the fire in the woodstove heating the house and the prospect of a mug of hot tea. I've learned that if I feel cold inside the house, the best way to warm up is actually to step outside for a bit. Coming in, I realize how warm and cozy the house actually is.

After the walk, I unwrap myself from my outdoor clothing and then have to deal with the dogs' snowballs in the fur on their bellies, legs and paws. I used to try rubbing them off with a towel, combing the snowballs out, then clipping them out of the fur. All of this was time consuming and ineffective. Last year I had a brainwave. Now I run warm water in the bathtub, put the dogs in the water and the snow melts off rapidly while their bodies warm up instantly. They are even eager to step into this bath.

A dog cookie each and they are happy to snooze in their favourite spots all afternoon, while I go back to my desk work. With tea in hand, the afternoon feels a bit like the start of a new day. A walk in winter can be energizing, not tiring.

Gloria Hildebrandt is the co-founder, co-publisher and editor of Niagara Escarpment Views.



▲ My dogs in the forest beneath Pileated Woodpecker holes. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.