

A COVID Winter

By Gloria Hildebrandt

This may be a winter shaped by COVID-19. That means, at a minimum, continuing with mask wearing, social distancing and avoiding large groups of people. What will Christmas and the other holidays be like? Had we all known back in March that we likely would be in this global pandemic for about a whole year, we probably wouldn't have believed it.

Yet for those of us who live in the country near the Escarpment, things will likely be pretty much the same. As someone with a trail-filled rural property, I know what to expect of my winter days. Health permitting, I'll have my usual solitary daily walks through the forest. They will be solitary as far as people go. I'll have my dog Thomas with me, who has known this property since he was a puppy, first owned by my father and now living with me. I'll be happy to see signs of wildlife out back, certainly birds, perhaps White-Tailed Deer, doubtless tracks, scat, scratchings and rubbings of shyer mammals like coyotes, porcupines, raccoons, squirrels, voles and moles.

When I sit on my bench under a White Pine at the back of the property, I usually notice the birds. Nuthatches and chickadees hop among the branches. Crows and ravens sometimes fly overhead. Woodpeckers are investigating tree trunks for bugs. Often, I hear the "chrrr" of the Red-bellied Woodpeckers. When I sit still outside for a while, I observe more wildlife than I think is there at first.

At the house I'll have to keep replenishing the bird feeders. I have different kinds of feeders available year-round but in winter they are especially



▲ My bodyguard.

important for bringing colour and life to the snow-covered herb garden just beyond a picture window. You can't ease up on feeding the birds and squirrels. They can come to depend on your food and could suffer without it. If you begin, you need to continue until warm weather returns. I find it costs a fair bit of money each year, almost as much as having another pet. Like a pet, they let me know when they're hungry because the feeder is empty. They must sit in trees and watch me, because soon after I've refilled the feeders, the animals are back at them.

Wildlife Is Watching

I've also been watched by wildlife in the forest, and I don't mean by little creatures. The deer usually see me long before I notice them. In fact, if they made no sound or movement at all, I might never know they're there. Often, it's Thomas who frightens them into fleeing, which is an amusing

sight, as the little dog barrels after the large bounders.

Once when I was using my walking stick to scrape soft ice off a boardwalk, Thomas suddenly ran back to me, then behind me, and I heard growling. I spun around and Thomas was defending me from a neighbour's dog who was just steps from me. I was able to pet it and Thomas stopped growling. The two dogs sniffed each other in greeting and then the neighbour's dog left.

The way that dog was able to come up right behind me without my noticing, made me realize that other animals could do that too. I might actually be vulnerable alone in the woods, except that animals fear humans and I'm usually with a dog who protects me.

A Coyote's Meal

Another wintry day, I was on a bench in the back, when Thomas returned to me with a dead rabbit in his mouth. How strange that he could have

found a dead animal that hadn't been eaten by a coyote. Surely Thomas was too small to chase a coyote off its kill. When I mentioned this to a friend, he said "Thomas couldn't have kicked a coyote off its kill. But you could have." I was alarmed to think that perhaps a coyote had been feeding nearby, who became startled by me and ran away, giving Thomas a chance to grab the meal.

Occasionally on a walk I'll come upon blood on the snow, perhaps just one red smear with a bit of fur or feathers. I'm always sad to see evidence of the death or injury of an animal, but as a naturalist, I suppose I shouldn't get emotional. If one animal dies, somebody else had a meal, I guess.

As long as the deaths I observe this winter are part of the circle of life, and not the result of COVID-19, I should consider myself very fortunate.

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