

Easy Going - Wisconsin's Northwoods

by Michael J. Dunn, III

Native Animals & Hunting

Whether it is the high point of a vacationist's day or just happenstance in the routine of a local resident, contact with forest animals is an inescapable part of being in the northwoods.

There is no quick and easy guidebook formula for directing people successfully to wildlife, only the merest hints ...like choosing early morning around daylight, especially in hot weather, or early evening as the ideal times for looking. Everything else depends on species, the time of the year, even the year itself.

The native animal that seems most to enchant observers is the whitetail deer. Does drop their tiny, spindly fawns during the last two weeks of May or the first one of June, about 200 days after their conception in late autumn. Twins are fairly common in whitetails over age two. The fawns move about with the mother almost constantly by summer's end, by which time they are losing their spots. Shortly all deer are changing to the "blue" winter coat with the shedding of the short red coat, which will now not recur till April or May. Antlered bucks make up perhaps 25 percent of the population. Their annual horn change begins in November or December. Porcupines, mice, and other rodents like the dropped horns for the minerals they contain, so very few shed horn sets are ever found in the woods. New horns begin to appear as soon as the grass greens up, and they harden as the passing summer hardens the internal blood vessels. In early September, perhaps between the fifth and the fifteenth, the bucks will start rubbing off the velvet.

Unlike many other wild species, the whitetail has adjusted very well to the presence of humans in its environment. About the only time that the deer can become a threat is when it is along a roadside, grazing or crossing, for it is unpredictable and a dangerous object to hit. Bear its roadside grazing habits in mind, especially if you are driving at twilight or at night, and particularly in fall. Remember too that if one deer crosses, another may follow, and that a deer might suddenly turn back in the direction from which it came.

The woods abound in ordinary animals like the woodchuck or the porcupine. The latter has an appetite for salt that causes it to gnaw ax or shovel handles or a much newer craving that causes it to chew plywoods for their resins. In spring the porkie can be seen feeding on new shoots high in popple trees. Contrary to old wives' tales, it cannot shoot or eject its quills.

The skunk is chiefly nocturnal but can be active any time. It likes burrows under porches or crawl spaces, and its presence is one by-product of leaving garbage around. Rabid skunks have been rare in the northwoods. But in case of any animal bite, do not shoot the offending animal through the head but turn the carcass or head over to a veterinarian, health official, or Department of Natural Resources (DNR) facility for tests. With a skunk, or any other animal, the best advice is that *if it acts odd, stay away from it!*

Raccoons prove far more appealing than skunks, with their bewitching black eyes and sometimes playful antics. Nocturnal, they are found along creeks, rivers, and lakes and especially in campgrounds.

Probably the most endearing and most common little wild animals of all, however, are chipmunks. Not only are they numerous; they respond to people (I have two little beggars who will cross the yard at the call of their names). They live in tunnels or old cavities in locations like brush piles. As with so many other wild animals, a caution or two is in order here: feed them only sensible food, watch out for bites, and never pick them up.

In addition to these wild but quite visible animals, the northwoods is home to animals that I regard as elusive. The prize among these, for almost everyone no matter how jaded, is the black bear. Sheer serendipity is about the only way you will ever get to see one. Nighttime bear watching used to be popular at garbage dumps, but under new regulations that call for covering of dumps daily and gating them at night, this activity has become a quaint part of the northwoods's past.

The bear chooses the area where humans are fewest; man's moving into its habitat is the bear's greatest threat. In suitable surroundings, however (roadless areas with a good mixture of habitat types), northern Wisconsin has a good bear population.

Bears do not mate for life but breed in late June or early July, the sow doing so only in alternate years. A sow will choose a hibernation site more carefully than a male, who may simply curl up by a stump, under a windfall, or in a deep hole in December, with snow to help insulate him. She dens up earlier and more elaborately under windfall tops or in a dug den where, conscious but with a slowed metabolic rate, she will give birth around early February to a tiny cub weighing under one pound. The cub or cubs will remain with her into the next hibernation, to be chased out the second spring.

At that point the rivalry between male adults and subadults becomes the young bear's greatest threat; one of the main causes of young bear mortality is the adult males' picking on male subadults. Barring that, a bear may live to its mid twenties, for it has few natural enemies beyond disease and encroaching man.

The black bear, game experts remind you, is still a wild animal, a very fast one with a big mouth. Ninety nine percent of the time he will avoid you; you'd be wise to give him wide berth one hundred percent of the time!

An animal considered common but seldom visible is the beaver. While other species have diminished, this species has proliferated. In the early 1900s it was rare if not vanished from these two counties; in recent years trappers here have been taking from 500 to 750 beaver a year. Its trademark, of course, is its remarkable complex of dams and lodges and the conical stumps it leaves when it cuts nearby trees, especially popple, for food.

The red fox is found in places where there may have been some development, like abandoned farms, in areas of lighter soils where it can find its favored diet of rabbits, mice, and other rodents. This graceful animal is not as large as it looks, standing perhaps 16 inches at the shoulder and weighing 12 to 14 pounds.

The coyote or brush wolf is fairly common but less often seen than heard. On a calm evening, particularly in early fall, one can hear the yipping of the pack, resembling the squeak-squeal-yap of small puppies. Populations of coyotes and foxes are down, but these species are a sporty and resilient resource.

Rounding out the list are the seldom seen mink, muskrat, weasel, and otter. Mink are still numerous enough to be trapped. The muskrat is a shy stream or lake bank dweller, sometimes seen swimming home. Ounce for ounce, the white weasel, his nose and tail tipped in black, may be the toughest of all wild animals. It has been known to kill and drag away a cottontail many times its size. The otter is remarkably playful and is most likely to be seen, if at all, at its sliding sites along winter's ice.

Attempts have been made to restore species that are known or suspected to have roamed the region in the past, or to establish new ones. In the latter case, an elk herd was started in captivity near Trout Lake in 1913 and set free in 1932. It increased a bit, partly by feeding on area gardens or crops, but the animals were shot by angry farmers or were poached away by local residents.

The fisher, which vanished here around 1932, was reintroduced between 1956 and 1963. The little pine marten, gone since 1925, was restored in 1974 and 1976. A few timber wolves were released in 1975, but cars, guns, and traps got them all within the year; speculation is that there may be a few native timber wolves ranging the Wisconsin Michigan boundary area.

Vanished species are the cougar (last killed in this area in 1909), moose (not seen since 1920), caribou and wolverine (not seen here since the 1800s), and perhaps the Canada lynx.

Among the most unusual and intriguing of northwoods birds are the eagle, osprey, great blue heron, and loon. Vilas County in recent years has had around 30 known, active bald eagle nests and Oneida about 17, while osprey nests were 8 and 15 in the respective counties in 1975-76. The shy birds avoid built-up areas but are seen soaring above fairly populous places like Manitowish Waters after the summer visitor surge has passed.

Hérons nest in fascinating rookeries, colonies of huge but crude-looking treetop nests; the ground below looks almost whitewashed. Northwoods folks benignly conspire to keep the locations of these nest areas secret to spare the great birds unnecessary upset.

Loons are close to a “changing status” situation, not far short of being labeled an endangered species. They are found only on quiet lakes with some wild shoreline and some respite from constant water skiing and pleasure boating. No northwoods stay can be complete without the haunting cry of a distant loon or its lilting laugh. A parent loon will live up to the name if a trespasser approaches its primitive nest, trying all kinds of crazy antics to draw the visitor away.

Hunting in Vilas and Oneida counties probably centers most on deer and partridge, which are sought in almost every township. One recent season the take was 4,866 deer!

Worth considering for partridge are the large networks of seeded walking trails in the Oneida County Forest tracts (especially the Cassian-Woodboro unit and the Willow unit) and in the Nicolet National Forest’s Kimball Creek area (just across the line into Forest County-45 miles of trails). The Wisconsin DNR has scattered gated and seeded hunter walking trails, just as it has many game openings as part of its program to have approximately three percent of all forest land in permanent grassy or seeded game openings.

Bear are hunted in some of the wilder areas like Winchester or Powell. Ducks are sought to some extent in potholes, along the Wisconsin River, and at the Rainbow Flowage, and geese near the Powell Marsh or around hay and potato fields where geese feed.

A book, however, can offer no more than general guidelines. Any good hunter knows the value of local advice.

Dunn III, Michael J. Easy Going – Wisconsin’s Northwoods. Madison, WI: Tamarack Press, 1978.