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Opening the cottage a ritual since childhood

The ice disappeared from Lower Beverley Lake very quietly this year. No fanfare, just gradual darkening and melting away, until one morning all was gone. Of course the water is very high, and the great bog island of Lyndhurst Creek might have created quite a flood had it not been for prompt action by local officials. Anyway, things seem back to normal again. Except for the squirrels in our house.

Obviously the creatures, both black and grey, had a busy winter. They opened large holes in the verandah screens, chewed extensive openings in the side of the house, and made passageways to explore the labyrinths between the roof and ceilings of this old farmhouse. In the evenings I hear them scratching overhead, listen to their scurrying in the kitchen walls, hear the patter of squirrel feet along the soffits of the verandah. So it's a spring war with squirrels, and so far we are not the victors.

This seems somewhat ironic because when I was a youngster I kept squirrels as pets. It was lonely being an only child on Whiskey Island before the rest of the summer people arrived, and so my parents compensated by giving me plenty of animals to look after. One year it was a baby red squirrel which I called Nuts. One of the Delta boys had picked this up when the mother squirrel dropped it, and he gave the quivering baby to me. We fed it warm milk with an eye dropper, cuddled it in a nest of clean rags, stroked the shiny new fur with gentle care. Nuts thrived, and soon had the run of the cottage. Looking back I marvel at my mother's patience. The squirrel went wherever it wished, climbing over curtains, running along atop the china cabinet, delving into open cabinets. It liked to sleep in a model of Columbus's sailing ship "The Nina". Nuts was indoors and out, jumping down to people's shoulders, riding on their heads, snuggling into pockets when the weather was chilly. I can still remember my father's angry cry when one day Nuts wriggled down between his shirt and his sunburned back.

I kept other squirrels. One summer we had four baby reds, but they never became as tame as Nuts,

By Joanne Broley Pollic

probably because they needed no other company than themselves. And one year we purchased two flying squirrels which were shipped all the way from Texas. We built a nest box for them high in a tree, with a good supply of hickory nuts for the ladder. But this proved a somewhat expensive experiment as the big-eyed animals were extremely reclusive, venturing shyly out only at night.

There were many other pets. Each spring a farmer from the big farm near Soperton would loan us a baby kitten to keep for the summer. My mother insisted that kittens had no business in a child's bed at night, but somehow my father usually managed to smuggle the cats in for a few hours. We had rabbits, white and docile. Usually these were also taken to the local farm in the fall. I recall one stormy weekend shortly after we planned to close the cottage. My rabbits across the lake, and returned to say that a major storm was coming and that there was no way he was going to go out in the rain. I decided to clean the rabbit pen that afternoon, only to find three tiny just-born babies in the hutch. So off he went, back to get the mother, waves and wind lashing at the boat. And we thought we knew a lot about animals!

There were guinea hens which proved not particularly friendly. And turtles which I kept in a large wooden bog partially submerged in the lake. Tame swallows and chickadees. Sunfish feeding from our hands at the dock. And, of course, snakes.

I think my interest in snakes may have had its origin at the Queen's Biological Station at Chaffey's Locks. The station was newly organized back then in the early forties. One of the persons responsible for these was Dr. Wesley Curran. He was enthusiastic about all the creatures of the area but one of his special projects was research on the Black Rat Snake. There were several of these animals at the Station and they were docile creatures which enjoyed being handled due partly perhaps to the warmth of human hands. They were handsome reptiles,



The author with her pet squirrel

glossy blue-black on top and creamy white below. Dr. Curran spoke vehemently against the prejudice many people have and talked about the good these snakes accomplish by eating rats and mice. I'd

experienced a bit of prejudice myself as a small Canadian child in a big Florida school: I was totaly ready to become a defender of snakes. This began my nobby or keeping snakes as pets. And I'd be thankful, I'm sure.

enjoyed the shocked look on the faces of some of the older ladies on the island when I pulled a garter snake from my pocket!

The Black Rat Snake has become quite a rare and endangered species. Indeed in Canada it is found only in a small area on the northern side of Lake Erie, and in our own Rideau Lakes and Thousand Islands areas. It has some interesting habits. It's a constrictor, squeezing prey before eating. During the first warm days in June the females make a nest under leaf litter or in rotten logs or brush piles, often returning to secretive places used in preceding years. They lay six to fourteen football-shaped eggs from one to two inches long. Unlike most snakes the mothers stay close by the nest to protect the eggs. The young hatch in late summer, emerging as vividly coloured grey and black colored babies.

Adult Black Rat Snakes spend the winter curled up together in a communal hibernating site called an hibernaculum. This is an underground den, well below the frost line, protected by rocky terrain and often in the deep forest.

Each fall the snakes may travel many miles to reach this secret place. Sun and warmth arouse them in April's early days, and they move again to summer grounds.

But there is much still unknown about their life history. Researchers at Queen's Station such as Dr. Gabriel Blouin-Demers from the University of Ottawa are trying to answer some of these questions. A study group within the Resource Conservation Service of the Ontario Parks Service is also involved. St. Lawrence Islands National Park became the first national park to keep track of individual snakes using radio telemetry.

While I write I can hear scratching overhead. I wince and think it's too bad that squirrels don't spend winters like the Black Snakes, causing no trouble, minding their business, brooding young in a wild place far removed from the attic of my cottage. And I realize there is a positive connection here - these reptiles probably take their toll of baby squirrels! Black Rat Snakes are certainly well-known anytime at our farm!

Night skies of May Several bright planets and a lunar occultation

During the month of May, the amount of daylight steadily increases from one day to the next, but not quite as much as it did in April. At the beginning of May, in this area, sunset is just after 8 p.m., and by the end of the month, it is at 8:40 p.m., an average of over one minute later each day.

Complete darkness in this area is only from 11 p.m. until 3 a.m.

The evening twilight of May give us an excellent chance to observe the bright stars of the spring constellations as they gradually come into view in the southern sky. As twilight darkens, try to notice the easily-seen patterns of Leo, the Great Lion of ancient mythology, high in the southern sky, and Virgo, the young lady of ancient tales, somewhat lower in the south eastern sky.

In Leo, the large ellipse is outlined by a distinctive "backwards question mark" above the very bright star Regulus and the large triangle of stars to the left, with Denebola as its brightest member. In the middle of the outline of a reclining Virgo is the brilliant whitish star Spica. Remember these three stars are at greatly varying distances. While our sun is eight light-minutes away from Earth, Regulus is 69 light-years away; Denebola is 40 light-years away;

Night Skies By Leo Enright

and Spica, though easily seen to be much brighter than Denebola, is over six times as far away, being no less than 275 light-years from us.

Among the five bright planets, Jupiter still dominates the evening sky and remains visible for most of the night. During evening twilight and the early part of the night, it is by far the brightest object in the south eastern sky.

Those who have a pair of good binoculars or a small telescope can easily see the four largest of its moons.

Saturn is fairly high in the western evening sky at the beginning of May, but it will be appearing slightly lower each evening, if one observes it at the same time from night to night. Those able to observe it with a good pair of binoculars or a small telescope can see, not only the system of rings, but also, Titan, the largest of its moons.

Saturn is to the left of the stars Castor and Pollux in the constellation Gemini, and is noticeably brighter than these two stars.

This month the moon makes several excellent conjunctions with bright planets, giving us some beautiful sights. On May 9 about

an hour after sunset, those with an excellent north western horizon may glimpse the thin crescent moon slightly above Venus and the Pleiades star cluster. The following night at about the same time the crescent will be slightly larger, but still a beautiful sight as it appears to the left of the bright star Capella.

During the night of the Full Moon, May 23-24, the moon may be seen moving closer to Antares, the brightest star in the constellation Scorpius, and in fact, covering the star, and "hiding it" for about an hour or more, in an event that is called an occultation. The disappearance of the star, as seen from this area should be about 4:15 a.m.

I would be interested in hearing from anyone in the area who observes the event and records precisely the time when the disappearance occurs.

The peak of the well-known Eta Aquarid Meteor Shower occurs May 3-10 with the best viewing in the southern sky early in the morning hours of May 5 and 6. More information about observing the moon, planets, and other objects of the spring and summer sky is to be found in the book *The Beginner's Observing Guide* which is now available at the Valley Book Shop in Perth and at Sharbot Lake Pharmacy.