Earth Almanac: January/February 2002

By Ted Williams

Bright Strangler

After the last leaves fade or fall, hardwoods across America brighten with bands of scarlet bittersweet berries strung like Christmas lights around their trunks and branches. Rarely does the dazzling display bring joy to those who value native ecosystems. The species of bittersweet you're most likely to encounter is an invader from Asia brought to North America as an ornamental in the mid-19th century. Today no habitat is safe from its deadly clutches. But in the eastern half of our country, save the extreme south, we also have a native bittersweet, much reduced. By all means decorate with bittersweet, but only the alien. If the berries occur just on the tips of the twigs, keep the clippers in your pocket. If they grow along the twigs in clusters, take as much as you want; while you're at it, you'll free up some trees.

Bandit Redoubts

Raccoons, common most everywhere in temperate North America, den in hollow trees, snoozing away cold weather. But by February the polygamous males are out and about even when the temperature drops to zero, visiting dens of females and, most likely, getting thrown out. A female will drive away all suitors save the one she considers her mate (or the one she chooses, if she hasn't bred before). If the mate of a captive female is taken from her, she will cry and pace almost constantly, and if he is then placed in a nearby cage, she will take comfort in reaching through the bars and touching him. Coon tracks are humanoid, with toes plainly visible.

If there is fresh snow, you can trace the nightly rambles of the males, locating their dens or the dens of females they have tried to visit. Males frequently switch dens. A den inhabited by a male coon one night may be inhabited by a skunk the next. Pound on every hollow tree you encounter along the trail. Sooner or later obsidian eyes will fix you from behind a black mask.

Grating Chorus

From New Jersey to Florida and west to Oklahoma, an explosion of song bursts forth, often with winter's first rains. In grassy swales, moist woodlands, and the marshy margins of ponds and streams, the upland chorus frog--a diminutive tree frog barely larger than a spring peeper--clasps low stems and branches with his sucker toes, balloons his throat, and carols to the world in a voice best duplicated by running your thumb over a comb's teeth. At this season, however, it is hard to be critical of the song of any creature spirited enough to make the effort. Be grateful for the grating, and

search for a songster far more beautiful than the song. But finding chorus frogs is a major challenge. Stand still until they sing again, then patiently scan ground cover with a muted flashlight. The first feature you see may be the light line along his upper lip.

Frozen Fliers

By aquatic insect standards the life cycles of the roughly 600 species of stoneflies inhabiting North America are generally normal. But one family--the Capniidae, or winter stoneflies--live in reverse. When frigid weather sends virtually all other flying insects to death, dormancy, or southern latitudes, the nymphs of winter stoneflies crawl from under submerged stones, make their way up streambanks, anchor themselves to rocks with gluelike secretions, crawl out of their skins, and take to the chilled air as four-winged adults. Winter stoneflies are no accident of nature; they enter a world virtually devoid of bird and insect predators. Look for them on streamside snow and ice or lumbering along in slow flight like giant gray mosquitoes. Unlike most insect infestations, an infestation of stoneflies--encountered at any season--gladdens those who delight in undefiled habitats. When water-quality surveyors turn up stoneflies in their macroinvertebrate samples, they classify the stream as "good quality" because these insects require clean, well-oxygenated water.

Fishlight

In the "dead" of winter, Pacific Northwest rivers come alive. From Monterey Bay in California to the Pribilof Islands in the Bering Sea, candlefish, a species of smelt, sweep in from the rich Pacific, staging in vast, shimmering shoals at river mouths, preparing for their short spawning run to low-elevation tributaries. Now all manner of wildlife converge to swill this protein in spectacular orgies--harbor seals, sea lions, cormorants, mergansers, loons, grebes, bears, eagles, beluga whales, and humans. So rich in oil are the fish that local Indians used to insert strips of bark in the dried body cavities and burn them as candles.

Winter Bluebirds

Never are eastern bluebirds brighter than when fields and backyards east of the Rockies are draped in snow. The species' population had been drastically reduced--mostly by starlings and house sparrows, which usurp their nesting cavities. But for the past 24 years, an effort by the North American Bluebird Society to popularize artificial nest boxes has produced spectacular results. As bluebirds surge back, more and more of them are wintering in the North, where they sustain themselves on fruit. During cold snaps the birds will roost in the boxes, sometimes in groups of a dozen or more. They eat all sorts of berries, but perhaps their favorite is cultivated winterberry holly. Collect this plant's berry-laden branches and push them into the snow. When bluebirds start coming, place some of the berries in a bowl and add mealworms. (Mealworms can be ordered in bags of 5,000 and will stay alive for months in your refrigerator. They're available from a company called Grubco (www.grubco.com) at 800-222-3563.) Bluebirds will learn to take just the mealworms, a much more nutritious winter diet. Starlings and winter robins will gorge on the mealworms, too, and the robins will drive the bluebirds away, so you will want to buy or make a "selective" feeder. Cut a large rectangle in the top of an old birdcage, then place the bowl of mealworms on the bottom. When bluebirds start coming into the cage, place a board with a 1-and-3/4-inch hole over the rectangle. Although that's big enough for starlings, they're extremely reluctant to enter, and the larger hole will prevent bluebirds from getting trapped when ice forms on the edges. Three or four inches under the hole, set a twig so that it rests between the wires. The bluebirds can perch here; otherwise they can't exit. In early spring your mealworm-fed bluebirds will have a head start over all nesting competition.