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By Ted Williams

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A Bendable Feast

In the wane of autumn, when Arctic winds sandblast north woods with sleet, the paper birch—a.k.a. "white birch" (for the color) or "canoe birch" (for the canoes Indians made with the bark)—feeds hungry wildlife. Across the continent, from treeline through boreal and hardwood realms, to the latitude of Indiana and thence along mountain ranges as far south as Virginia, this sun-loving pioneer of forest openings is heavy with catkins. The females of these long, fuzzy flowers—named for their resemblance to a cat's tail—are packed with double-winged seeds. All manner of birds and small mammals consume the seeds, sometimes directly from the catkins. Deer, moose, porcupines, snowshoe hares, and beavers eat the tree's twigs and bark; grouse pluck its buds. To survive the ice storms that glaze their exposed stands, paper birches evolved their pliability. Years after a storm you'll see them drooping, as Frost wrote, "trailing their leaves on the ground / Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair / Before them over their heads to dry in the sun."

South on Platter Hooves

The longest land migration in the Western Hemisphere—comparable to those of the African savanna—gets under way in mid- to late fall as barren-ground caribou leave the Arctic tundra of Alaska and Canada. Farther south, in boreal forests and subarctic tundra, the larger woodland caribou begin their shorter trek, and in Europe various reindeer (now considered subspecies of caribou) start migrating from comparable latitudes. The caribou, which can weigh as much as 700 pounds, is the only member of the deer family in which females regularly grow antlers. Huge, concave hooves support the animal on snow and peaty soil, assist it on lengthy swims along migration routes, and help it scratch away snow and ice to feed on lichen (*caribou* is Micmac for "scratcher"). Caribou, which still migrate to northern Washington, Idaho, Montana, and Minnesota, used to range as far south as Detroit. The species survived in Germany until Roman times; in England, until the Middle Ages; and in Poland, until the 16th century. Maine lost its population in the early 20th century, probably due to extensive logging and the resultant northward expansion of white-tailed deer and the brain worm they carry, which is deadly to larger deer species.

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When the Fat Guy Sings

They're hard to miss, but you have to be in a boat a fair distance offshore. The big ones weigh 40 tons, and in late fall, having gorged on krill, they are even fatter than usual. Now humpback whales of the Northern Hemisphere are cruising south from rich, Arctic waters on a migration that will take them 3,000 miles to their tropical breeding grounds. (As this migration begins, humpbacks of the Southern Hemisphere start heading south, out of the tropics and toward their feeding grounds in the Antarctic.) First come lactating females and their calves, then juveniles of both sexes, then mature males, then unmated females, and, finally, pregnant females. On reaching the breeding grounds, mature males break into song—a complicated series of moans, cries, snores, groans, and other vocalizations that can last half an hour. All humpbacks in the North American Atlantic population sing the same song; a variation is sung by all members of the North American Pacific population, and other populations around the globe have their own unique renditions. Songs change gradually over the years.

Upside-Down Umbrellas

It was wise to procrastinate, but now that the workers and unmated queens have died, and the fertilized queens are ensconced in or under hollow trees, bark, attics, barns, chimneys, siding, and the like, it's time to hunt for the nests of paper wasps. Why, you ask? Because they are beautiful works of art that won't be used again except by you; because they provide learning opportunities; because they make elegant decorations in Christmas wreaths or on mantels; because collecting them is an excuse to get kids outside. Wherever you live in the United States, you probably share habitat with at least one of our 22 species of paper wasps. Poke around in dead wood and old buildings, in bird boxes, bat houses, behind shutters; eventually you'll find their abandoned homes—inverted umbrellas, with six-sided, honeycomb-like cells, suspended by a single, super-strong stalk, which limits access by ants. Don't confuse these nests with the melon-shape nests of white-faced hornets (which also make fine trophies). Perhaps you will be too early and encounter a few survivors. The males, which can't sting, have lighter faces; but the sure way to identify a male is to pick it up. If you get stung, you were wrong.

Finding Love in Winter

When November spills grays and browns across temperate woods of North America, Europe, and Asia, one ground plant provides shine and color. Those green, sawtoothed, elliptical leaves pushing jauntily through dead foliage and snow belong to a dwarf perennial called pipsissewa—a.k.a. prince's pine, ground holly, love in winter, or bitter wintergreen. The name pipsissewa derives from the Cree pipsisikweu, for "breaks into small pieces," which the plant will not do to your kidney stones, despite Indian lore. With equally disappointing results, Indians and early settlers prescribed pipsissewa to cure venereal disease, heart ailments, rheumatism, typhus, scrofula, and smallpox. More recently, however, soft drink companies have achieved impressive results by using it to flavor root beer. Chew a leaf and you'll see why.

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A Hawk for All Seasons

If you are fond of red-tailed hawks, consider this lament: "The widespread prejudice against all hawks is exterminating this useful species. . . . It will be a sad day indeed when we shall no longer see the great redtail sailing over the treetops on its broad expanse of wing and ruddy tail, or soaring upward in majestic circles until lost to sight in the ethereal blue." That was written in 1937 by Arthur Cleveland Bent. Today all raptors are protected and generally appreciated, and none is more abundant or more widely distributed than the redtail. It is one of the few birds of prey you can count on seeing anywhere in the contiguous United States during winter. Not all the color morphs or subspecies have the distinctive red tail, but all are huge, and all soar on broad wings. Few birds are more adaptable than redtails; they'll eat virtually anything, from carrion to skunks to cats to lizards to toads to turtles to rattlesnakes, which they exhaust by inducing them to strike at their veinless wingtips. The future of redtails brightened with the perches and open hunting areas provided by the interstate highway system. As you drive it, scan trees, telephone poles, and signposts for white breasts, puffed up against the wind.