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Earth Almanac: November/December 2006

By Ted Williams

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American Lion

You may never see America's lion—a.k.a. cougar, painter, puma, panther, catamount, and mountain lion. But especially now, at the onset of winter, you have a good chance of finding its tracks—doglike but usually with no sign of the retractable claws and with three distinct lobes at the base of the pad. Perhaps more than any other species, our lion illustrates the resilience of nature when humans give it half a chance. Throughout all but the last several decades of our national history we tried to wipe the species from the face of the earth—and nearly succeeded. Then, merely with enlightened regulations and the resurgence of deer and elk, it recovered, at least in the West. It did so without costly committees, congressional hearings, or invocation of the Endangered Species Act. As we were arguing about reintroducing it to Yellowstone National Park it reintroduced itself. Already the breeding population has expanded into Michigan and Missouri, and individuals of unknown origin are showing up in the East.

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Patrick Johns/Corbis

Flowers to Swords

Now, half a year after their spectacular blossoms have moldered into the earth, catalpa trees produce cutlasslike bean pods that may be a foot and a half long and that remain attached all winter, unless children put them to their proper use—for sword fights. There are two very similar species, the southern catalpa (native to Florida and Georgia and west to Mississippi) and the northern, or hardy, catalpa (native to southern Indiana and Missouri and northeastern Arkansas). Both species have been widely transplanted outside their natural range. The catalpa—whose name derives from Catawba, the Indian tribe that used the leaves as a poultice for treating wounds—is also known as “Indianbean,” “cigar tree,” and, particularly in the South, “worm tree” for the larvae of a sphinx moth, which feed on the enormous, heart-shaped leaves and are prized as bait for sunfish. State extension services even publish fliers on how to get your catalpas infested.

Winter Wanderers

Evening grosbeaks—robust, gregarious, nomadic New World finches—were unknown east of the Great Lakes until the winter of 1889–90, when raucous flocks blew into New England like frat partiers in yellow togas. The next irruption didn’t happen for 20 years, but since then evening grosbeaks have been showing up more frequently, and they’ve established a breeding presence in the southern boreal forest of eastern North America. In 1823, when they first revealed themselves to western settlers at the foothills of the Rockies, they happened to appear at dusk, thereby giving rise to the myth that they become active in the “evening.” The French more accurately called them *le gros-bec errant*, or “wandering big beak.” Evening grosbeaks will take over your yard, roust you from slumber, empty your birdfeeders, and impart revelry to the bleakest winter morning. Join them outside; you will find them remarkably tame. But this tameness can lead to their undoing. Frequently they are hit by cars

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when they congregate along roadsides to pick up gravel for their crops. "Too bad about them yeller birds," they say in northern Maine.

Mini Goose

Those geese cutting through the cold mist of November mornings aren't as high as you thought. They are neither Canadas nor snows, but brant—barely bigger than mallards, moving south from their breeding range in the Arctic into what, for them, are the balmy coastal realms of the Northeast and Pacific Northwest. Brant, circumpolar in range, feed almost entirely on vegetation, primarily eelgrass. Because they are poor divers they'll pluck as much as they can at low tide, then consume the floating leaves as the water rises. New Jersey hosts the greatest winter concentrations of Atlantic brant. In the 1930s, when blight almost wiped out the eelgrass beds of Barnegat Bay, brant learned to eat sea lettuce. Their calls resemble the distant baying of hounds—so much so, claimed Irish ornithologist William Thompson, that when his horse (a seasoned fox hunter) heard a flock of about 500 he became very "impatient" and "spirited."

Glutton's Delight

In 1722, when Thomas More sent American cranberries to a botanist friend in London, he included a note in which he described the species as "a drunken rogue that will neither grow or keep without swimming in water; he makes the best tarts in the world and therefore highly valued among gluttons." At the first Thanksgiving or shortly thereafter, the Indians provided this fruit to the Pilgrims, who later called it "cranberry" because the pink blossom reminded them of a crane's head. The American cranberry also grows wild in wetlands from Newfoundland and the Maritime provinces to Ontario, and from Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan to New Jersey, Long Island, and Massachusetts. Wisconsin produces about half the country's commercial crop. Massachusetts produces another third, and the remainder comes from New Jersey, Oregon, and Washington. Another New World species, not cultivated, is the small cranberry. Both species moved south with the Laurentide glaciers of the late Pleistocene Epoch.

Flying Oarsmen

Not all insects slow down or die as winter approaches. Be on the lookout for water boatmen—now at the start of their breeding cycle—sculling to the surface on oarlike hind legs and launching into the air. They may fly five miles, touching down feet first in any water body, even a puddle, to feast on algae. Water boatmen, represented throughout most of temperate North America by more than 100 species, remain active even under ice, finding air pockets. In all seasons a water boatman traps an air bubble under its wings so it may breathe as it forages or rests below the surface. Don't confuse these insects with the similar but usually larger backswimmers, which often prey on water boatmen; backswimmers can deliver painful bites, and, as their name implies, swim upside down. Because water boatmen carry their own oxygen supply with them they can thrive in warm, nutrient-rich or even chemically polluted water unsuitable for most other aquatic life—your birdbath or swimming pool, for example.