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Earth Almanac: November/December 2007

By Ted Williams

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Michael Quinton/Minden Pictures

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Billy Goats Gruff

In the high, cold country of the Canadian and American West, mountain goats—the continent's only species of chamois-like "goat antelope"—are congregating in larger groups. Courtship, initiated in early winter when females undergo synchronized estrus, entails much chasing and kicking. At last the billy cautiously approaches the nanny from behind, sniffs her genitals, then rests his chin on her rump. She responds with stiff-leg kicking. After mating the nanny is apt to lick the billy's neck or face. Unlike domestic goats (to which they're not closely related), mountain goats have nearly smooth horns that curve only gradually toward the neck and, instead of a true beard, a throat mane that continues onto the chin. With their double coats of inner wool and thick guard hairs, mountain goats can't tolerate warm summer temperatures. So as the last glacier shrank, they retreated northward from as far south as Arizona, New Mexico, and northern Mexico. Their current natural range is southeastern Alaska to south-central Washington and east to Montana and Idaho, but they've been successfully transplanted in Oregon, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, South Dakota, and Olympic National Park in Washington.

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Bertram G. Murray/Animals Animals

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Candy Ferns

Late fall is the time to look for licorice ferns in coastal mountains from the Aleutian Islands to central California. You'll find the long, pointed evergreen fronds bursting from the wet moss on deadfalls, stumps, and the trunks and branches of deciduous trees. But it is the brown, translucent, licorice-flavored rhizomes that provide the medicine and tasty snacks long favored by Indian tribes of the Pacific Northwest. They contain ostadin, a compound 3,000 times sweeter than sucrose and said to be an effective alternative to antihistamines in relieving lung congestion, sore throats, and coughs.

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Joel Sartore

Screamin' Jay Squawkings

So adept are blue jays at making their presence known throughout their range (basically the eastern two-thirds of our nation and much of southern Canada) that few people realize they migrate. Mostly it's the young ones, filtering down from the north in small groups that rarely exceed 50 individuals. Now they're uncharacteristically quiet. This silence, however, is more than offset by the birds that remain. Early 20th-century ornithologist Edward Forbush described blue jay behavior as mainly "fuss and feathers—bluff and bluster" and noted: "Where there are blue jays, there is action and usually noise, for jays, like crows, are fond of hearing their own voices. Often a great uproar in the woods may be traced to a dozen or more blue jays in the tree-tops, screaming as if in great terror or pain, and apparently for no earthly reason except to keep up the excitement." But in winter, as in all seasons, jays are also capable of soft, sweet song, and because so much of it is exquisitely accurate mimicry of other birds, they are seldom given credit for it.

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Lawson Wood/Corbis

Vegetarian Mermaids

When the first line storms of autumn chill the waters of the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico, Florida manatees (a hardy race of West Indian manatee) ease toward Florida from as far west as Texas and as far north as Virginia. The West Indian manatee, the dugong, and the Amazonian and West African manatees are the only herbivorous marine mammals on the planet. They comprise the order Sirenia, named for the Sirens of Greek myth because early seafarers were said to have mistaken them for such. Hard up indeed was the sailor who perceived a mermaid in the form of one of these obese, bewhiskered, wrinkled, squinty-eyed, distant relatives of the elephant. Lacking the thick blubber of other marine mammals, Florida manatees must spend the winter in warm springwater or the heated discharges of power plants. They are equipped to survive in either freshwater or saltwater, but in salt they need sources of freshwater for drinking. Strikes by motorboats are one of the leading causes of mortality for these highly endangered mammals, and when they congregate in Florida waterways, wildlife managers further restrict boat speeds.

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Mike Wilkes/NPL/Minden Pictures

Winter's Good Cheer

In nature one species' Aspen may be another's Miami Beach. Consider, for example, snow buntings. When winter kills insects and vegetation in their summer range these robust sparrows migrate to the relatively warm, distant south, which for them is the icy, snow-blasted open country of southern Canada, the northern United States, and corresponding latitudes in Asia and Europe. Look for them as they swirl down into fields and meadows, flashing white as they turn their bellies and underwings toward you in unison, then vanishing as their black-tipped wings and brown backs merge with the dark winter sky. A sudden cold snap can send enormous flocks south. Even on the coldest winter days, snow buntings keep up a cheerful-sounding commentary of brisk, musical call notes. Nineteenth- and early 20th-century naturalist John Burroughs compared this vocalization to the "laughter of children." "The fox hunter," he wrote, "hears it in the snowy hills; the school boy hears it as he breaks through the drifts on his way to school; it is the voice of good cheer and contentment."

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Joel Sartore

Gifts to Pray For

The presents under your tree never go unnoticed. Not so with the smaller, unwrapped ones that may be on it. Of these, none are more beautiful than the styrofoamlike "oothecae"—carefully fashioned with fast-drying foam, shaped like walnuts or golf balls, and no bigger than either. These are the egg cases of any of about 20 species of praying mantis that inhabit most of North America. Mantises can't survive cold weather, but in the warm environs of your house hatchlings are apt to emerge from an ootheca before you notice it and can place it outside. Despair not, for they damage nothing. They even make interesting pets; you can scoop them up and keep them in straw-filled jars until mid-spring, when they'll be able to survive in your yard. Feed them small insects such as fruit flies, which almost always appear indoors if you let fruit ferment in an open bowl. Praying mantises are useful in pointing the way to lost children, should you misplace any—or so it is reported in French folklore. While these insects are voracious predators (large species will take small birds, lizards, and frogs), the common knowledge that they "control" insect pests is incorrect. They kill pest predators, too, but even if they consumed only pests, there aren't enough mantises to make a dent.

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William Leaman/Alamy

Bottoms-Up Bird

The brown creeper—the New World’s only tree creeper—ranges throughout North America and as far south as Nicaragua. But now, when winter grips the northern border of their domain, these drab little birds with the down-curved bills ease southward in the most casual of migrations. Often they go unnoticed because they fly only short distances, are well camouflaged, and throw in with mixed flocks of nuthatches, chickadees, and woodpeckers. When threatened a brown creeper will freeze, remaining motionless for several minutes, often with long wings spread. Starting at the bottom, look for them as they spiral up from the base of trees, probing for insect eggs and pupae, stiff tails pressed against bark. If you see a bird descending a tree, it’s not a brown creeper.

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Neil Holmes/Alamy

Late Locks

As wildflower blossoms decline through spring, summer, and fall, our appreciation for them builds until the last petals have withered and died. Or so we supposed. But now—if you look hard in the eastern half of our nation except northern Maine and southern Florida—you'll find nodding lady's tresses. These never-common orchids bloom until the first hard frosts, infusing bleak, sometimes snow-covered meadows, pastures, fens, woodlots, and even lawns with the kind of beauty and fragrance we associate with temperate days long past. *Spiranthes*—the generic name is from the Greek *speira*, for "coil," and *anthos*, for "flower," while the specific name, *cernua*, means "nodding." Its root systems must be associated with a specific fungus for normal growth to occur, so starting nodding ladies' tresses from seeds is difficult. On the other hand they're easier to transplant than most other wild orchids. Cultivars are widely available at nurseries.

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