Earth Almanac: January/February 2009

By Ted Williams

Joel Sartore

Winter Fruit

Having ripened since summer, the white, marble-size fruits of various species of snowberry now brighten the winter scene throughout most of North America. Unlike thick-clustered, branch-bending berries such as those of mountain ash, snowberries tend to be sparse and seem to float magically in the air. The berries, which taste like soap, are an important though rarely relished food source for many species of birds and mammals, and because they're not a first choice, they persist late into the season. ("The thrashers will eat them when everything else is eaten," reports Las Pilitas Nursery of Santa Margarita, California, "but they have a silly, gagged look as they choke the berries down.") The plant, which spreads by rhizomes, flourishes after such disturbances as logging and is resistant to browsing and fire. Meriweather Lewis so delighted Thomas Jefferson with snowberry he'd collected that the president sent his friend the Comtesse de Tesse (Lafayette's aunt) a cutting. Soon the plant was being cultivated in Europe, and because birds spread the seeds in their droppings, it quickly naturalized.

Robert Royse

Megaduck

Pity not the common eider, largest of all North American ducks, as it sculls through freezing spindrift blown by the winter tempest. It will spend the season in the inshore coastal waters of southern Alaska, Hudson Bay, and the North Atlantic to New Jersey (and in similar latitudes around the pole) until spring drives it from these relatively balmy refuges to its northern breeding grounds. Only the eider's feet are exposed to the cold, and these, mostly bone and sinew, have a miserly blood flow. The rest of the body is sheathed in thick fat and wrapped in the down with which the best parkas and sleeping bags are stuffed. In periods of extreme cold, presumably to conserve body heat, eiders will gather in rafts so dense that individuals cannot be counted.

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Tim Fitzharris/Minden Pictures

Otterly Cute

In kelp forests—from Santa Barbara north almost to San Francisco—California sea otters are giving birth, usually to a single pup. Coveted for their fur—the densest of any mammal—all sea otters, but especially this subspecies, were victimized by the fur trade. Even the most clinical of biologists has difficulty not waxing anthropomorphic about sea otters. These are animals that, having carefully wrapped themselves in kelp, sleep on their backs, sometimes with their front paws covering their eyes or sometimes with all four feet sticking straight into the air like a family dog reclining on an easy chair. Stroll a beach on a still day and you may hear clicking as sea otters use rocks to open the shellfish they've placed on their chests (some prefer to leave the rock on their chest and smash the shellfish into it). They then pop the meat into their mouths as if it were one more pretzel en route to the maw of a portly, couch-bound viewer of Monday Night Football.

Taylor S. Kennedy/National Geographic Image Collection

Pink Mist

In the wane of winter a pink mist spreads over wet meadows and floodplains from Newfoundland to Georgia and west to Texas. Diminutive spring beauties—a.k.a. fairy spuds—are blooming in staggering profusion. In "The Song of Hiawatha," Longfellow called the plant miskodeed: "And the young man saw before him,/ On the hearth-stone of the wigwam,/ Where the fire had smoked and smouldered,/ Saw the earliest flower of Spring-time,/ Saw the Beauty of the Spring-time,/ Saw the Miskodeed in blossom." Soon the forest canopy will leaf out, shading the flowers. The above-ground parts will wither and die, but in the rich humus the tubers, well stocked with food, hold the promise for next spring's display. Few wildflowers are easier to transplant to yard or garden. If you can resist eating the tubers—which are delicious raw, boiled, roasted, or fried—plant them after they've gone dormant in shaded or sun-dappled moist but well-drained soil.

Andy Rouse/NHPA/Photoshot

Gluttonous Gadabouts

The bohemian waxwing—the larger, stockier, circumpolar cousin of the cedar waxwing—derives its name from its gypsylike wanderings. Driven less by cold than lack of fruit, it sometimes wafts south and east from its stronghold in Alaska and western Canada, penetrating deep into the lower 48 states. Winter irruptions are always unpredictable and often massive. A raucous, ravenous flock of several hundred may descend on, say, a crab apple tree, denuding it in minutes. The three species of waxwings—bohemian, cedar, and Japanese (which, oddly enough, breeds only in eastern Russia)—are named for the waxy droplets on the secondary feathers of adults. Waxwings frequently gorge on berries to the point that they have difficulty getting airborne. And if the fruit is fermented, they may become so intoxicated that they stagger.

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Some Tough Cranes

At favored sites across the southern tier, from California to Florida, sandhill cranes are displaying or staging for northward migration. Watch and listen for them as they spiral down onto moist grasslands or grain fields, legs trailing like Air Force tanker hoses, long tracheae (looped around breastbones like French horns) blasting out their rattling calls. Ungainly on the ground as they are graceful in the air, courting partners face each other, heads thrown back and beaks lifted (the male's higher than the female's). Loudly vocalizing, they hop, hover, flap, bow, jab, and circle. It is the resolute or starving predator that takes on a sandhill crane. Raptors are flown at and kicked. Mammals are approached menacingly in swanlike attack posture, wings outstretched, beak cocked and pointed. If this fails to intimidate, the crane charges, hissing, stabbing, and kicking.

Rod Planke

Delicious Medicine

Dead flowers can have their own subtle beauty, as you'll discover most anywhere in the contiguous states, if you go on a winter hunt for common evening primrose. Check fields and open woodlands where the soil isn't too wet. Now the bright-yellow blooms that opened on spring, summer, and fall evenings have given way to inch-long, four-chambered pods that pop open, exposing tiny red seeds to wind and hungry birds.

Evening primrose, a biennial and neither a true primrose or a true rose, is easily cultivated. Harvest mature seeds and plant them 12 inches apart in rows separated by at least two feet.

Every part of the plant, from seeds to root, is edible—in fact, according to most reports, they're delicious. The leaves can be cooked like spinach, the flowers used in salads, the seeds roasted and sprinkled on any food as a seasoning, and the roots boiled like parsnips (which they are said to resemble in flavor). The species has been widely introduced as food in Europe, where it goes by such names as night candle and German rampion.

Unlike so many great-tasting food items, evening primrose isn't bad for you. "There is evidence that primrose oil, in combination with thyme, may have some benefits in the treatment of acute bronchitis," reports the Mayo Clinic. The clinic, however, is reserving judgment on the plant's alleged efficacy in easing PMS, breast pain, hypertension, schizophrenia, chronic stress, irritable bowel syndrome, and hemorrhoids. Nor has the clinic substantiated the claim that evening primrose cures hangovers, though this would be an especially expedient attribute in light of the fact that it has also been said to increase one's appetite for wine.

Ron Wolf

A Plague of Butterflies

Delicate, beautiful, and ethereal, butterflies seem the least likely of all candidates to burst forth upon the landscape in biblical plagues. But from Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico west to the Pacific, the California tortoiseshell sometimes does just that. When nature conspires to suspend such population controls as predation, limited food supply, and cold weather, these insects hatch in such profusion that they become a hazard for motorists when their wings block vision and their bodies smear across windshields in streaks of yellow protoplasm. Even bikers complain about them smashing into their chests and staining their glasses.

Apart from this, however, and the defoliation of sundry species of wild lilac (their larval food source), California tortoiseshells don't do any major damage. And they benefit wildlife. Pupae, draped from branches like ripe crab apples for hundreds of acres, are feasted on by birds, bears, skunks, raccoons, possums, and mice.

But at this season adults appear in numbers that seem reasonable and balanced as the strong sun of late winter wakes them from hibernation. Look for them in chaparral, brush, open woods, and forest edges. If a new generation brings an irruption, you won't see it until after the lilac leaves unfurl.