



Conservation Matters

Quarterly Newsletter of the Mills County Conservation Board

Fall 2003

Winter Predictors

A couple of years ago I compiled a newsletter article that told you about some signs of spring and how nature told us that spring is coming. Since then I have had numerous people come up to me and tell me about a number of sayings having to do with nature and winter. Some seem to carry a little merit and some just seem to be a little out there.

When woodpeckers leave expect a hard winter. In most of the mid-west, woodpeckers are year-round residents. In fact, winter is usually the best time to view woodpeckers since the leaves are off the trees. But when they actually leave for winter, it is time to hunker down and cut some extra firewood.

When birds build their nests low you can expect a mild winter with little snow. This seems to be true most of the time. But keep in mind that birds, like doves and cardinals, usually build their nests close to the ground anyway.

Before a bad winter squirrels begin to store food early. This saying seems to be true. When squirrels start storing acorns and walnuts while the weather is warm, a bad winter often follows. Even the nuts that squirrels are storing can be an indicator. They say that if the shell is thick on a hickory nut expect a rough winter.



When woodchucks go into hibernation early, it is a sign of a bad winter. This seems to be very true because cooler nights can set off the hibernation instinct, and early cold spells often precede bad winters. Woodchucks also go into early hibernation when their food supply runs low.

The first call from a katydid is six weeks before the first frost. The song of the katydid at night is one of the sure signs that fall has arrived. Katydid's begin to call when the night temperature drops, so it may be logical that consistently cooler nights happen about six weeks before a frost.

If snow falls on mud it stays all winter. This one is up for discussion, I am not sure if it is true or not but it's still interesting to think about.

Dark woolly bear coats predict a harsh winter. The woolly bear, a fuzzy little caterpillar, has three bands of color, a reddish tan middle and a black band at both ends. When frightened, the woolly bear rolls up into a fuzzy ball. As the saying goes, the more there is of the light-colored middle, the milder the winter will be and the blacker the woolly bear, the worse the weather. According to the *Audubon Society Field Guide to Insects*, the coloration indicates how near the caterpillar is to full growth before autumn weather stimulates it to seek winter shelter.

When hornets nest high up in trees expect a bad winter. I do not believe this is an accurate teller of the weather. In the same year I have seen nests a few feet above the ground and as high as 30 feet up in a tree.

When a beaver cuts wood a month ahead of time expect a bad winter. I can not really judge the accuracy of this saying because I do not know when a beaver is supposed to cut wood.

Sun dogs in the fall precede a wet winter. This one seems to be true. Sun dogs are half-rainbows that show up near the horizon to the right and left of the sun, usually when it is setting. Sun dogs indicate the presence of moisture in the upper air, and a rain or snow should be soon to follow.

Whether you watch the woodpeckers' habits or watch for sun dogs in the evening sky, trying to predict the coming winter by close observation of nature can be fun. And who knows, you might even get it right.



Pest Control with Owls

One pair of field mice can produce as many as 17 litters a year. Yes, that is right, 17. If five babies from each litter were to survive and start reproducing, within three or four generations the original pair will have produced 1 million mice. Once again, yes, that is right, 1 million. Enter the great horned owl. According to experts in this field, the owl has been around for about 36 million years, and has helped keep rodent populations in check.

The great horned owl will stalk and eat snakes, skunks, animals much larger than itself, and of course, mice. An owl's vision is 100 times greater than humans, and the bird requires about one-tenth the amount of light to see. It's eardrums are the largest of any bird, giving it such keen and precise hearing that it can capture prey in total darkness.

The great horned owl stakes out a territory before mating season, sometimes occupying 6 square miles. He will hoot at and attack any invaders. When mating season starts, the male performs many of the antics of other birds, including aerial acrobatics, and once he finds the right female, they mate for life.

Upcoming Events

- ◆ Hayrack Ride. This year we will be holding 2 Hayrack Rides. One will be October 12th and will leave from Pony Creek Park at 5:30 PM. The other will be October 19th and will leave from the Indian Creek Complex (just south of Nishna Valley School on H34) at 5:30 PM. We will have s'mores and hot chocolate after the rides. Call Jerad to pre-register. (527-9685)

- ◆ The Mills County Conservation Board will again be sponsoring our annual outing to Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge near Mound City, Missouri. The trip will take place on November 15th from 7a.m. to 2p.m. Transportation will be provided. Bring a sack lunch. Pre-registration is required. Last year the trip was a big success, the group was able to view around 20 bald eagles along with numerous ducks and geese. One of us was also lucky enough to see a couple of tundra swans.

- ◆ Feel free to call me anytime to set up an environmental education program or to make reservations for upcoming events. Call 527-9685 and ask for Jerad. A two-week notice is preferred for programs.