

MACALESTER COLLEGE

SAINT PAUL, MINNESOTA 55105

DEPARTMENT OF BIOLOGY

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Subject: A HOLE-in-the-SNOW at ORDWAY.

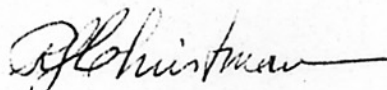
Winter walking is quite a contrast to ordinary walking although fully as interesting. Perhaps it is because it is a little more difficult, considering the depth of the snow, the sometimes slippery paths, the cumbersome clothing needed to ward off the winter elements. One's attention is usually required at the immediate foreground, i.e. where the next step is; as a result if one walks continuously he is apt to find his eyes glued to the trail or to the ground in front of him. Thus it is a good idea to stop frequently and have a look 'round. This further heightens the stillness of the scene for while walking the crunching of the snow crackles through the crisp air and echoes back; but while standing quietly one can contemplate in sublime quiet his winter surroundings.

With such "vantage-pauses" one finds himself examining things rather more thoroughly and perhaps enjoying them more. To begin with, one does not really expect to see much astir at -20° C - and it is also a temptation for one himself to keep going lest he freeze up. Therefore whenever something does show up in the winter woods it takes on a special and focussed importance.

A small moving object (bird? drifting oak leaf?) caused me to stop and fix my attention upward. Adjusting the focus of my binoculars brought one thumb to near-numbness but the creature proved to be a foraging Redpoll, little winter visitor from the arctic forests, furiously working over the tip ends of a birch tree for an infinitesimal modicum of nourishment. Just then one of my mittens fell to the ground and reverted my attention to the ground; there almost at my feet was a good-sized hole in the snow. Another step and I would have obliterated it and passed without noticing it.

The hole was about 75 mm in diameter and went down to the soil, about 250 mm at this point. It was obviously dug by a squirrel, possibly a Fox Squirrel by its size, who had been foraging. The quest, though successful, proved fruitless this time for there among the bits of dried grass and debris lay the rotted remains of an acorn.

Thus, in the hole-in-the-snow, lay a complete paragraph in the life of a wintering creature: Holed up in his lair by the severe weather; driven out by hunger to take up the endless search for provender; foraging in a likely spot and having the luck to come upon a foodworthy object only to find it not edible - disappointment, frustration but the relentless drive continues. How many forays of this sort will prove fruitless? Yet the species will survive. A whole tiny drama in a hole by the winter footpath.



R J CHRISTMAN,
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