



This is the culprit responsible for the circles of holes around tree trunks



Black Vultures overhead decided I was not carrion

Brunswick Wildlife Nature Writing: Back to Basics

In preparing a future workshop presentation, I decided my first step should be to go back to basics. I started keeping a written nature journal in 1994; however, that has largely been replaced by computer-generated word processing documents, digital voice recorders, photography, and exchanging emails with others.

Emails concerning nature-based activities and observations are then copied and pasted into my yearly Word-based journal. Also, Brunswick Wildlife articles are the final component of my virtual nature journal.

Going back means to once again keep a written journal. Journaling observations even in your yard and activities at your feeders will greatly enhance the joy of watching nature.

My first back-to-basics attempt was on an overcast, drippy morning at Ev-Henwood on the banks of Town Creek. I turned myself into a pack mule carrying a folding canvas chair, rain jacket, camera with plastic garbage bag for protection, binoculars, a satchel with reading material and notes on creative nature writing, the book *Winter World* by Bernd Heinrich, and my cell phone.

I considered leaving the cell phone in my SUV...but what if I needed it to report my mauling by a bear?

Cell phone? I literally stomped mine into my concrete driveway when I retired. I had carried a phone, beeper, or both for many years...too many years. A few months back, my daughter and son-in-law talked me into joining their plan.

One of my daughter's motivations was probably concern for my safety when I am out in the wild; however, she is of the "texting" generation and I am of the "emailing geezer" generation so texting has proven to be a good way to keep in touch. You see, pack mules can learn new tricks!

Writing about nature requires experiencing nature not just passive observation. Nature writers must understand the interconnectedness. You are writing from the inside...in the global ecosystem that is Earth...you are a member of the biosphere of all living organisms.

As I established "base camp", I heard the gurgle of the creek, shotgun blasts in the distance, and a bird or two. Because the weather was bad, I initially heard only a Red-bellied Woodpecker, Carolina Wren, and American Crow. Heard but not seen.

One of my favorite winter visitors, the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker flew in. This member of the woodpecker family chisels rings of small holes (sap wells) in the bark of trees, feeding on the sap as it flows. They maintain their wells daily to ensure adequate flow.

Sapsuckers are a keystone species, supporting a community. They are responsible for creating cavities that are later, when abandoned, used by other species. Also, other animals may supplement their diet with sap from wells or insects found in them. Overwintering hummingbirds may count on this supplementary diet.

The red on the sapsucker's throat added needed color to the winter scene...and, as the bird led my eyes to follow it from tree to tree, I noticed the plum-colored new leaves unfolding from the buds of several hardwoods. This was not, however, the only color. The large camellias behind me, planted long ago by former landowners, were in full crimson bloom.

It started to rain so the pack mule loaded up and headed back to the parking lot. The sapsucker started its soulful mewling call and seemed to follow me out since we were headed in the same direction. Or was it trying to get me to stay and provide companionship on this bleak day?

On my first attempt, I overdid it...duh...so my next two trips to Ev-Henwood were low-tech and without all of the baggage. On the second trip, a Hermit Thrush greeted me with its "chupping" vocalization and posed patiently while I took numerous photos. They are one of the tamest winter visitors, allowing you to get fairly close to them and, when flushed, they usually stay close enough for you to relocate them.

Like a number of species, this thrush pumps its tail while perched; however, they are the source of one of my favorite pieces of avian trivia...they are the only species I know that pumps their tail upwards from the horizontal instead of down.

By the third trip, I must have mastered the art of being still and just observing. A fairly large flock of Black Vultures passed overhead and checked me out. Finally they decided I was still breathing and moved on.

Unlike the Turkey Vultures they pal around with, Black Vultures do not migrate far if at all. Their wings are smaller so they cannot live as far north as Turkey Vultures; however, even on a frosty Brunswick morn, they find enough lift from weak thermals to fly off to the Roadkill Café.

I'll include more nature writing techniques in an article planned for this fall. I'll leave you with one rule for now. "Creative" implies finding YOUR style not using anyone else's. Well one more rule...one that also applies to nature photography...learn the rules and then break them judiciously to achieve true creativity!

John Ennis



A tail-pumping Hermit Thrush "chuffed" at me