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Strange Winter



quail in circle

For one raised in northern New York state, New Jersey winters are a poor imitation of the real thing. Sometimes we have blizzards and four-foot drifts, weeks of bitter cold and ice thick enough to drive a car across. But these things, so ordinary in the north, are not too frequent, and when they do come, can't be expected to last long.

I remember one New Jersey winter which set a record for mildness. Except for brief spells of 8 to 10 degrees above zero, and a few breaths of cold wind, it was no winter at all. We were eating fresh escarole until after Christmas; insects were flying and birds were singing.

By early February, I was still waiting for winter, while experiencing spring. As I was walking one morning, flying squirrels, who during frigid weather draw a curtain of shredded bark and leaves across their entrance, peeked from their open door and took nutmeats from my hand. Two raccoons were still out, although the sun was about to rise. One splashed away through the water; the other climbed high up a stud overlooking the swamp. Beyond him a red-tailed hawk sat upright, light from the east highlighting his pale chest.

There was water everywhere, for although we had had no snow, rain had been abundant. The beaver dams, about 100 feet apart all along the stream, in broad basins held back water which trickled musically over each rim. The lodge, regularly replenished with mud and sticks, cast dark shadows in the flowing water. Only the night before, a late-born beaver kitten had come from the lodge to feed from my hand, murmuring his eager greeting of a trusted friend.

A little past the stream I approached Apple Bog, where deer eat sweet potatoes and apples, provided as an alternative to hunters' bait at the refuge border.

Screened by bushes, I sneaked to within 100 feet before a feeding doe saw me. I froze. She raised her head high and looked straight at me for two minutes. Then she jerked her head this way and that way, studying what she saw. Now and then she gave her tail a nervous wag. Finally, she started forward in cautious steps, evidently bent on circling to get my scent. I tiptoed away and took another path.

Onward I went to the hedgerow, where I fed the quail. They didn't need the grain I gave them. There were myriads of weed seeds and other natural foods. But still, to compete with scattered grain outside, I

fed them all winter. I often surprised a covey before sunup, still squatted in their nighttime circle on the ground. They exploded every which way to make their escape.

One morning I was late. Before I came within sight I heard a sweet-voiced chorus. I crept near; then, fifty feet away from the hedgerow, I stood behind a leafy ilex, watching and listening. There came the rustle of busy feet and the soft tones of quail conversation as 20 brown-clad creatures hurried by, never knowing I was there.

My joy was not yet complete. On another path I skirted a wooden swamp where ancient cedars hold their heads to the clouds. There the path was littered with cedar twigs, some lush with berries, which a red squirrel had thrown down in his traditional role as feeder-of-the-deer. My coming disturbed his work and he crouched motionless as I walked underneath. After passing him, I was surprised to hear a sound I thought I had said goodbye to in November. From the cedars came the warble of a bluebird, who must have been spending the winter deep in the swamp, feasting on knobby blue cedar berries. That same morning I heard the *peent, peent* of a woodcock, which I normally expect in March.

My winter walk provided interest aplenty, but still I scanned the sky wistfully, hoping for blizzard and cold, and feeling cheated that for the few months when we New Jerseyans can expect snowy footprints and sparkling snowdrifts, these things had been denied to us. ■ ■