**Showcasing the DNR: Under the spell of the Wintermaker**

*Editor’s note: This story was previously issued as an “Outdoors North” column.*

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In the sunny afternoon skies, especially from this high spot, it was easy to see the beautiful white-blue blanket, stretching far across the hills, down into the ravine and up along the river.

Pulled around the trunks of the twisting cedars, the maples high on the hill and the pines standing watch over the winding little creek, this cold, snowy blanket was ironically providing warmth and insulation for all those fast asleep beneath its cover.

And with this blanket – whose thickness varied from here-to-there over the landscape – came a profound silence.

This silence was borne on the winter wind, dead or dying in a stand of hardwoods, just up above a small forest foot path etched into the hillside.

The darkness concealed within this silence can lull a person to sleep once and for all, especially if they’re cold, wet and tired. With the sunlight fading, many a person here has wondered about their measure, a good distance from the car.

Though the dying light painted an orange and purple masterpiece on the horizon, the subzero temperature continued to fall. A winter moon was on the rise, casting black reaching shadows across the blanket, under the bared arms of frozen trees.

Under these conditions, a person dry, comfortable and warm can be tempted to stay longer and longer. For as the shadows fall, a person can perceive seemingly enhanced powers of the senses within the deathly quiet of a nighttime winter woodland.

Sitting on a log, overlooking snow-covered hemlocks and cedars, it seems like you can hear the cold cracking of a tree trunk more than a mile away. Snow crunches loudly with each footstep farther into the arms of the canyon.

The stars seem clearer, brighter and closer on these frosty, silent nights – the Wintermaker glimmers and sparkles in all his frigid interstellar glory. The North Star and Milky Way seem like you might just be able to touch them.

A whiff of smoke trailing slowly from a cabin chimney way across the valley might make it to your nose, instantly warming you all over inside. It seems the taste of everything from hot chocolate and marshmallows to gingerbread, cinnamon and peppered potato soup is better out here in the deep, icy forest.

The flames from a campfire in the snow seem to burn soft, warm and deep into your body, warming you from the inside out, while the icy air leaves a pink-rose blush of cold on your cheeks.

This is the magnificent splendor of the wintertime.

I was thinking about how plants and animals contend with the harshest of nature’s seasons. It’s fascinating to think of all the mechanisms at work.

Some animals like black bears, of course, hibernate, sleeping their way through the weeks beneath the snowy blanket. Other creatures, like turtles, burrow into the mud at the bottom of a pond or river to sleep.

Some frogs hibernate underwater, while others – like spring peepers – find cracks, leaf beds or other places to tuck themselves into to hibernate. Wood frogs can survive being frozen and then thaw with the help of internal “antifreeze.”

Though above-ground portions of plants wither, shrivel and die, bulbs and root systems “rest” and live off stored food reserves until spring.

Wasp queens abandon their nests and dig into dirt, leaves or other places to hibernate for the winter. The colony dies off before the snows arrive, with a new crop of wasps to populate the colony emerging in spring.

Little brown bats retreat to the protection of caves or mines where they drop their body temperatures and slow body functions to a sleeplike state of torpor.

Some fish, like the wily trout, remain relatively active during the winter, under the ice. Other fish slow their digestion and activity.

White-tailed deer move from the deep snow cover of the north country to places miles south where they group together, huddled under dark green forest canopies to make a stand against winter’s powerful crippling forces.

Many birds simply fly away to warmer, friendlier skies, conditions gentler to their delicate constitutions. Owls remain active during the cold months, some arriving here for wintertime stays from Canada’s boreal forests or farther north. Great-horned owls are on the nest with eggs or chicks.

Still other animals, like weasels and snowshoe hares, change color from brown to white in the winter to better protect themselves from predators. Wearing their new coat, they blend in like a piece of white paper, lying across winter’s blanket.

Humans, mimicking our plant and animal brothers and sisters, adopt many of these natural measures – or a combination of them – to survive the wintertime ourselves.

Some of us, like the warblers and the bluebirds, fly away to warmer places during some or all the winter, or we too change our coats to adapt effectively to the cold and snow of the season.

Others remain active with all sorts of winter activities outdoors, embracing the season, loping along the snow- and ice-covered trails, like wolves and moose.

A lot of us – to varying degrees – burrow into crevices, warm leaf beds or other warm places, lowering our heart rates and slowing down our bodily functions. *“Please don’t wake me, no don’t shake me, leave me where I am, I’m only sleeping.”*

Looking down at the blanket – bluer and bluer as the light dims – I wondered where I fit in. Years ago, I was like a summer bird, chasing a fetching mate, as I flew to the south and the west to the land of sunny skies – California dreaming.

However, as time passed by and the seasons changed, I returned to the cold, snow and winds of winter, favoring a life here again among the great north woods.

I wear a warmer coat in the wintertime. Some days, I like to get up and around outside to see what’s going on, like a young coyote.

Other times, like the frogs, I retreat underwater or to another quiet, dark place to hibernate. Here, in a warm winter nest padded with warm grasses – fat on food resources – I sleep and twitch as I dream small animal dreams.

I wait for the big gears of the universe to turn the world around, pushing the clock and the calendar to a sunny spring day, when I will re-emerge into the sunlight, like a beautiful damselfly with new wings.

With the hour late, I headed back down the snowy trail. Each boot step brought me closer to home, as the dark blue-black skies ignited with a shower of sparks from a meteor, trailing off as it spun and sputtered into the wintry night.

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