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Conservator

Summer 2002

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Seasons of the Marsh column-Summer 2002

By Bruce Masterman

The summer marsh has a certain natural rhythm that doesn't exist in the other three seasons.

Life in summer is unfolding as it should. The many and diverse wetlands creatures go through their daily routines as they were created to do, unhurried and by rote, honing survival skills shaped by evolution and adapted to present times.

The ducks and geese eat, rest, socialize, watch and train their young to survive, and they do this day after long summer day. Young wings get stronger each day, preparing for their first major journey that is their destiny. The birds seem content in this rhythm, knowing it will be several weeks before the urge to migrate becomes so undeniably strong that it will be time to take flight for the long trip south.

Except for twice-daily forays to feed in nearby fields, most waterfowl species don't move far from the water on these hot summer days. Along with the shorebirds, they hang close to their broods, warily eyeing a coyote that ventures too close, or a gull that swoops menacingly in search of an easy meal. They swim around the edges, forming larger and larger flocks as helpless winged downy puffballs develop into young adults with an ingrained sense of safety in numbers.

To many, the bird life is the natural pulse of the marsh, the outward sign of life of a body of water fringed in cattails and bulrushes. Some people, it seems, need to see the birds in order to know there is a pulse, to be assured that life exists in this oasis of water and rich grassland on the drought-parched prairie.

Nature knows better. Nature knows the pulse doesn't need to be seen to be there, that it also lies under the surface of the marsh, strong and throbbing and never ending, like a beating heart.

The pulse is the backswimmers, freshwater shrimp and other tiny aquatic creatures that become visible only if you look hard for them. It is the muskrats that swim among the green grasses, nibbling off succulent stalks and taking them back to their dens where hungry youngsters await.

The pulse is the mink that darts furtively through the greenery, seldom seen by human visitors but a deadly presence nevertheless. It is the garter snake that slinks through the grass, occasionally slipping into the water and swimming in pronounced S-curves with its head raised like a periscope, extended tongue testing the air like a wolf sniffing out its prey. And the pulse is the crickets and the frogs, regularly heard but seldom seen.

It is in summer that it becomes all too apparent that more than wild creatures depend on the marsh for life or, perhaps more accurately, quality of life.

It is a late July afternoon. The sun is starting to slide down toward the western horizon. Mallards and pintails scoot over the water, and great flocks of Canada geese are heading out to feed. A northern harrier skims low over the tops of the cattails.

Turning to watch the activity around me, I notice movement on an earthen berm several hundred metres away. A middle-aged woman, in shorts and t-shirt, jogs easily along a dirt trail.

My binoculars reveal the woman has a yellow tape player strapped to her waist, a cord running to earphones on her head. Seemingly oblivious to the natural choir of honks and quacks all around her, she is lost in her own world. Although her ears are closed, her eyes are not.

From a sheltered bay close to her, a flock of geese lifts off, noisily, until 75 Canada's are in the air a stone's throw from the woman. Her pace slows to a walk. Her head turns and she watches the flock until the birds disappear over a rise.

As the woman resumes her run, her gait seems stronger and more determined than ever. She occasionally glances at the spot where she last saw the geese, looking as if she's willing them to return.

Unwittingly, she is caught in the rhythm, and has become a part of the pulse of the summer marsh.

END