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Conservator

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Seasons of the Marsh column

By Bruce Masterman

The marsh looks barren and lifeless.

Blanketed in snow and ice, it looks so different than just a few short months ago, when the water was alive with migrating waterfowl and murky waves lapped against the shore. The waves have been stilled, transformed into a sheet of ice.

The cattails and bulrushes stand tall and defiant, hoarfrost dusting their stalks. It seems a lifetime ago when I eased a rowboat into those same stalks, tossed out a dozen decoys and waited for magic time.

But that was another day, another season.

Now my retriever Belle, whiskers white with frost and black muzzle grizzled with snow, runs atop the same water in which she usually swims. She dashes around in pure doggy joy, stopping only to sniff a muskrat house or some critter's frozen scat.

And, yes, there are critters. Lots of them. The winter marsh may look lifeless, but it's not.

In 1948, Aldo Leopold wrote in *A Sand County Almanac*: "January observation can be almost as simple and peaceful as snow, and almost as continuous as cold. There is time not only to see who has done what, but to speculate why."

In the marsh on this frozen day, I savor the speculation and beauty even as I pull the wool toque down over my ears.

Single-line coyote tracks bisect the snow. Their strategy seems simple – sniff out muskrat dens, wood snags and territorial markings. They've stopped at every clump of grass, hopefully nosing each in search of a meal.

Tiny pairs of mouse paw prints look like giant zippers connecting clumps of bulrushes. One track leads away from the protective cover, heading towards a lone clump 50 yards away. Halfway there, it abruptly stops.

Wing-type indentations in the snow bracket the final set of paw prints. I wonder if the mouse even heard the owl before it struck.

Belle and I continue our journey of discovery and speculation. We leave the ice and head out across the snowy grasslands.

Suddenly, Belle's tail starts wagging like a metronome on speed and she hits overdrive. The ring-necked pheasant rooster cackles madly as it flushes and flies away. I smile. Where were you last fall, I ask aloud, and what are you doing this far from the protection of the bulrushes? Feeling silly, I look around to make sure nobody is listening.

But I know we're alone. The marsh in winter does that to people. Keeps them away in droves, which is good for speculators like me and dogs like Belle. For some reason, there's a common misconception that nothing happens at the marsh in winter. I silently give thanks for ignorance and the privacy it creates.

After crossing the uplands, we return to the ice. I spy some tracks I don't see often. Mink. The paws are little more than an inch wide and less than two long. Each paw

has five toes, showing tiny claw marks in the skiff of snow. The tracks meander across the ice, the animal's gait alternating between walking and bounding.

Twice, the trail is swept away by wind, and I search in ever-widening circles before I pick it up again. I follow the prints for a half-mile, stopping periodically to peer well ahead with my binoculars, hoping for a glimpse of the animal itself. Eventually, the trail disappears completely and I reluctantly turn away.

We swing north towards the vehicle. Something looks out of place atop a signpost 300 yards ahead. Through binoculars, I see a plump white body with two black eyes peering back at me. A snowy owl.

A movement behind it diverts my attention. A bushy-coated coyote wanders out of a patch of cattails, stops and sits down on the ice. Amazingly, I can see both owl and coyote in the same sight picture, like watching nature on television.

After a few minutes of watching them watching us, it's time to go. The marsh has given us enough action -- and speculation -- for one winter day.

Even before driving away, I am planning my return.