

NATURE NOTES – JUNE 28 2018

One of my favourite habitats at any time of year is a marsh. These areas of natural filtration are always alive with life and the one at the end of Rainbow Lake, although small, is no exception. While the woods surrounding the lakes are generally much quieter now that the birds have settled down to the serious business of breeding, the marsh still rings with the hoarse chacks of Common Grackles, the staccato trill of Swamp Sparrows, the lazy “Witchity, witchity” of the Common Yellowthroat and the noisy cries of Red-winged Blackbirds. The social structure of this latter species is quite interesting. You have probably noticed that the handsome black male with his bright red wing patches arrives first in the spring and sets up his territory, noisily proclaiming his rights with the familiar “Kinkoree” song. Then the females arrive and soon the posturing male has himself a little harem, as several females nest within his territory. So yes, they are polygamous. What is rather fun is the fact that the immature males, told by their yellowish-orange rather than bright red wing patches, will often sneak in while the dominant male is distracted and mate with one of “his” females. Ecologists first noting this behaviour termed such birds as “sneaky f@*%ers”, I kid you not. Just Google it. The term was first coined by the late John Maynard Smith, a British evolutionary biologist and no-one has yet seen fit to come up with a more polite term for this behaviour!

Sitting in the middle of the marsh in one’s kayak not only allows one to hear all the birds, but to check out the myriad of other creatures making the marsh their home. Squadrons of dragonflies and damselflies patrol the airways, water striders stroll over the water on little air bubbles under each foot, the sinuous Northern Water Snake can be seen on the borders of the marsh, usually sunning itself on a nice warm rock as do the several species of turtles found around the wetland. Then, of course, there are the frogs. The deep “chug-a-lug” of the bullfrog, the twangy note of the Green Frog and the somewhat rude, raspberry-like call of the Leopard Frog are all there for the careful listener. A sudden splash in the water is what usually betrays their presence as their camouflage is amazing. Both Beavers and Muskrats can be seen easily and if you are paddling quietly you may see a White-tailed Deer on the fringe of the marsh, alert for any sign of danger.

As you paddle back down along the lake and leave the marsh behind, the bird song changes. The persistent two-note call of the Red-eyed Vireo is probably the one most commonly heard, along with the eponymous Eastern Phoebe. Thanks to the caterpillar depredations, it is easier to see birds than usual at this time of the year as the tree foliage has a somewhat spring-like appearance. Great Crested Flycatchers can be seen quite well, while usually it is only their strong “Phweep” call that gives them away. The whining call of the Eastern Pewee, “Pee-a-weeeee” is another common sound along our lakes. Lastly, if you are lucky, you may hear and see a Yellow-billed Cuckoo with its guttural “Cowp-cowp” call. Caterpillars are a favourite food item of this species, so all I can say is the cuckoos have a lot of catching up to do!

Alison Bentley, Rainbow Lake Road Rep.