

Comes an Unkindness

By Ken Kalish

The leaves are gone from our trees now. Only the most stubborn of oaks still retain their brown plumage, this week's rains having stripped all the rest. Lying in an even layer of wet death and emitting the musky odors morels will turn into gourmet flavors, fallen leaves are already on their way to becoming future topsoil. Our east fence line sports maples, poplars, buckthorn, and less demanding oaks. Skeleton limbs of those trees poke the sky, almost imploring the atmosphere to drop a warm blanket of snow with which to cover their drought-stressed roots.

As ever, a new vista greets us in this season – one which reveals formerly concealed forest secrets. Here one finds an abandoned flying squirrel nest, there the bones and beauty of a jay devoured by a hawk. Delicate, upside-down teardrops, each the size of a basketball, show us where paper wasps chose to build summer cabins in thick hazelnut stands.

Porcupines, formerly hidden in the dark recesses of leaf mass, become suddenly visible. It is mating season, so the females have lost their back quills and are being urgently sought out by chuff-chuffing males. Both have become vulnerable to the rifles of those who would kill them in an attempt to protect trees from the animal's appetite for sweet inner bark found behind the rough exterior skin of pine and oak.

Deer, betrayed by their late summer rust coloration, can no longer hide in thickets. In two weeks they will have become grey and invisible in the colorless grey of the forest, but for the moment they must fear archers.

Giant brown snowshoe hares are struggling to hold off turning white until there is at least some permanent snow cover. Too late. The harvest moon is past. A few millennia of genetics cannot be overcome by individual will.

There is something new under this week's iron sky. A formerly red sugar maple and two giant oaks have become a rookery. An unkindness of ravens selected those trees for their proximity to free food – three miles of road kill and about 300 acres of corn. They flew over the house this morning in numbers that briefly made the sky a shade darker than the heavy overcast perpetually hovering overhead these last four days. A solemn red-tailed hawk, sworn enemy of ravens, gave way as the conspiracy cut its way to the field just south of our native grasses.

Sensing the safety of isolation, a new species of carrion-eater has surreptitiously slipped into our yard. The size and shape of a raven, this lordly intruder wears a formal white dickey and matching vest, white shoulders adorning its otherwise black robe. It stays only so long as there is neither threat nor competition, then escapes to the northwest. It brings us a new face, one never before seen around here.

Another visitor is in the neighborhood, rare, but in no way new. She is a moose, escaping south in search of succulent browse and safe haven from those few parties licensed to take moose this season. DNR area 521 has no moose permits, so she is safe here. This neighbor is impossibly invisible, and neighbors speak of her, never having seen her. She prefers isolation. She avoids we who are hairless monkeys and her many distant cousins, the local whitetails. Here and there a trail camera clicks and catches her in an intimate moment. She will leave soon, marching back north to her brethren once the snow comes and the locals begin target practice for our rapidly approaching deer season.

We wait here in this pause between heat and cold. Winter will come, but not before Indian summer grants us a final reprieve from all things frigid. There is time yet to finish insulation and deer stands, to fill the house with happy holiday scents before the dread starvation moon is upon us. It seems unbelievable that in just short of 150 days nearsighted porcupine pups will be exploring their amazing world, fawns will be impatiently waiting for spring blossoms in which to hide, Christians will be hiding boiled eggs, and ruffed grouse will be hatching new broods.

Our seasons represent change, yet are changeless. Life begets death, death preserves life. Fall's rotting corpses nourish spring's lush growth. Then, not many days after, comes another unkindness of ravens seeking new food and refuge along our east fence line.