

Su Writer's Voice
Natural Observations
Winter Bird Count, January 4,2018

Before I begin my story, I want to share my experience of the Lunar Eclipse on Wednesday morning, January thirty-first. Because it was such an extraordinary occurrence, I wanted to experience it. This eclipse was the first of the new year, taking place on the last day of the first month, and was the first Blue Moon of the new year; that is, the second full moon occurring in the same month. It was also a 'Super Moon'- closer to the Earth than usual and so appearing fourteen percent larger than normal. I thought that warranted setting the alarm and getting up at three fifty-seven to go outside and have a look at the eclipse when it was nearing its peak. I checked the temperature; minus four. I dressed appropriately and took my camera with me as the dogs and I headed out the cabin door. As I stepped onto the snow at the foot of the porch my senses were inundated. In the North a band of gauzy pale green Aurora lit the horizon, stretching across the sky just above the forest. A Northern Hawk Owl was hooting from its perch in a tree somewhere in the North West. Its voice was clear in the silence of the night. Stars glittered in the velvet sky, and above it all, the moon glowed reddish-orange. Occasionally a tree limb popped in the cold, and one time I heard the deep muffled boom of the ice cracking on the lake about a half-mile to the South. It was a truly Alaskan experience, and I was so grateful I had decided to witness it.

I could also see the moon through the kitchen window, so I watched it from the warmth of the cabin, venturing out a few times an hour to take photos of the progression of the eclipse until it was nearly over at five past six. The Aurora had long since disappeared, the Owl had stopped calling, and the trees had stopped popping. Even though some of the magical elements had faded, as I took one last photo of the moon, the awe of the experience was still strong and I smiled in appreciation. I knew all across this beautiful State, other Alaskans were having their own unique experience of this majestic Lunar occurrence.

On January fourth the annual Winter Bird Count occurred in the Talkeetna and Trapper Creek Count Circle. Kathy Ernst has compiled and printed out a detailed list of the results of this Count, and the print-out is available at KTNA, so I won't go into the details of it here. This is just the account of my own experience of going out to count birds.

Since moving from Birch Creek Ranch in 2015, I no longer live within the Count Circle, so- sadly- all the birds visiting my feeders cannot be included in the Count. I had covered downtown Talkeetna the past two Counts, but now that area was going to be covered by another birder. I wasn't too sure where to go. Just as I was preparing to leave the cabin, the power suddenly went out. Because I have a pair of Doves, a Budgie, and a House Hen, I wanted to be sure they were going to be alright, so I decided to wait and see if the power was going to come back on. To my relief, the lights in the bird's aviaries came on exactly half an hour later. I headed out the door, the two dogs bounding down the trail ahead of me.

I decided to head up Birch Creek Road, to search for Redpolls, which have often flown in a flock over parts of the road, feeding in the birches, in winters past. There had been a snowfall the day before, and it was a gamble as to whether the road had been plowed. The car I now drive is a "low rider", with just a few inches clearance off the ground, so I can't drive it in more than four or five inches of snow. When I turned onto Birch Creek Road, I found that it hadn't been plowed. I decided not to go more than half-way out, for I knew the farther I went, the narrower it would get and the deeper the snow. Sure enough-it was getting pretty dicey whenever a pickup truck would come the other way, for I didn't want to get stuck in the berm on the side of the unplowed road. I turned around at mile three. I hadn't seen any birds at all. Heading back, I came upon a young man with his pickup stuck deep in the berm off the road. I loaned him my snow shovel, arranging to pick it up later.

Back at the Spur Road, I called the Tottens and asked if I could come over and count birds at their feeders. I stayed there until nearly sundown, and scored two Downy Woodpeckers, three Pine Grosbeaks, plus several Nuthatches and Chickadees. That lifted my spirits. As I headed back to get my shovel, I decided to go on up Yoder Road. I had a strong feeling I just might see a Grouse, even though the sun had just dipped below the horizon. Rounding a bend in the road, I came upon a moose crossing the road. I was driving slowly, looking for birds, so the moose had ample time to complete its journey across the road and on into the forest.

Rounding another bend, I caught my breath when I spotted a Ruffed Grouse in a tree beside the road. It was busy nipping dormant buds off the ends of twigs. As I quietly stopped the car, it paused to watch me for a few moments. When I appeared non-threatening, it resumed its eating. I snapped a couple of photos through the window, but the low-light didn't make for good photography. I soon left the bird to finish its evening meal in

peace. I turned the car around just past the bridge. I decided to return the next day and see if I could spot any Dippers on the creek.

Nearing the place where I had seen the moose, I glanced into the forest. This time there was a mama moose and a calf from last summer. They were looking across the road, and when I looked where they were gazing, I was surprised to see a bull moose walking amongst the trees, still sporting a full rack of antlers. It was too dark to get any decent photos, so I just enjoyed watching him cross the road and join the cow and calf, eventually laying down near the trunk of a cottonwood, the calf also laying down, while the cow kept watch. It was the first time I'd seen snow on the antler palms of a moose, and it gave me an idea for a painting.

The next day I returned to Yoder bridge. The sunlight on the snowy trees was lovely. Just after I parked the car and headed for the bridge, a Sharp-shinned Hawk came flashing overhead. I was happy that it would be included in Count Week. Sure enough-a pair of Dippers were working a pool far up the creek. As I stood on the bridge watching them, one by one they flew downstream until one had landed in a shallow pool next to the bridge and took a bath for a few minutes while I snapped photos. Then off it went to rejoin its partner, both of them heading back to the pool upstream. It had been minus seven degrees when I headed out of the cabin on this day, and it felt at least that cold standing on the bridge. I had to take off my mitten to use the little buttons on the camera, and my hand quickly got very cold. Between photos I buried it deep under my clothes to warm it up again. I envied my dogs who ran and played in the snow, rolling with abandon, chasing each other and seeming to be unaffected by the cold. They were like the Dippers; well-insulated and warm.

And so another Count was over. Thanks be to the seventeen Birders who braved the cold and did their part to find birds. And thanks to Kathy for compiling all the information. Here's to another twenty-six years-and more-of Winter Bird Counts!