

“OF RARE BIRDS AND BEARS”

The winter had been challenging, with deep snow, long cold snaps, mid-winter rain that coated everything with treacherous ice, and a wild wind storm in April. The snow was slow to melt, with patches lingering in the shaded forest into June. Spring was about a month later than usual in fully arriving. The warmth of the sun was very welcome. The trees began to bud and grass shoots poked up through the mud left by melting snow. The days lengthened, butterflies arrived, and migratory birds added their new songs to the winter flock's. The annual magic of springtime in Alaska was finally underway.

But something was off. The days grew warmer. And then the first few hot ones hit. The climbing temperature was ominous. This was different. We'd experienced a few hot days in late May, into early June before, but non-stop, without a break, and very little rain, was extraordinary.

I have two thermometers; one on the porch up under the roof, and one in the shade of a spruce across from the south side of the cabin.

I keep a running 'mini journal' on my calendar, jotting down temperature, day length, weather notes, wildlife sightings, etc. Looking back over May, I noted there was no rain that month. The first two weeks the overnight temperatures were in the 29-36 degree range. Daytime peaks were in the high 50s. Things began to change in the third week. Nighttime low went to the low 40s. On the 20th the high was 68 degrees. It reached 70 degrees on the 22nd, 74 on the 29th, and 78 on May 31st. 46 degrees overnight.

These were unusually warm temperatures for May. Day after day of clear skies and sunshine. Rain in May brings the plants into bud, then to flowers, so there will be berries later in the year. I wondered what the berry crop would be, if the hot, dry weather continued.

Neither of my two house hens wanted to go outside in the daytime heat, and neither did I. I set up two small floor fans and a small humidifier. I kept the cabin around 68 degrees by opening the door and windows at night, after the sun had gone behind the trees in the northwest and the temperature had finally dropped into the 50s. I took the dogs swimming in the nearby lakes as often as I could. They looked so happy, paddling in the cool water, fur floating out around them, tails like rudders as they turned in circles and serpentines. A good roll in the grass after made it perfect.

The hottest days I recorded were in the first week in June. The temperature peaked at 80 degrees on the 2nd, and 84 degrees in the shade on the 3rd- 97 degrees on the porch. Thankfully, it was 47 degrees overnight.

I had June eleventh circled: the first rain. It only rained for about an hour- a teaser! But at least the dust got washed off the leaves and everything smelled wonderful. I could almost hear the forest sighing with happiness.

I had circled the 15th and in blue felt tip pen wrote: “11:30 pm-RAIN!!” Real rain, this time. Little birds who had been born and fledged during the heat wave were experiencing their first rain.

I had bought hoses and two sprinklers for the first time and was watering my perennial garden. I had two bird baths set up. Often I would change the water two or three times a day because they were being used so much by all the birds, from Chickadees to Woodpeckers. When I ran the sprinklers and puddles formed on the ground, little birds would come to bathe. Chickadees, Juncos, Robins, and Nuthatches would be taking turns in the puddles. Some birds would perch on tree branches, letting the water wet their feathers as they wagged their wings and tails.

It was sunny again on the 17th, but cooler at 71 degrees. That night I was awakened by the sound of a Grizzly Bear dumping over my empty burn barrel at 1:30am. I watched silently from the porch as it poked around the clearing a little then returned to the forest.

It was raining on the 18th when the second Grizzly arrived at 1:38am. It too, dumped over the burn barrel, pushing it on its side with its front paws like it was a play thing. Somehow, the old, rusty barrel withstood the battering. The Bear soon lost interest and wandered off into the forest.

The Solstice was sunny and 84 degrees. 19 hours, 55 minutes day length. That was the hardest part of the heat wave for me- the long hours of daylight. I don't like it much over 70 degrees, so when it climbed into the 80s and reached towards 90, that was a long time to be sequestered in the cabin, waiting it out.

July 2nd, it was 70 degrees by 9am, and hit 91 degree on the porch by noon. Thankfully, it was 50 degrees overnight. I would walk the dogs in the cool of the night. July 4th was another hot one. I had walked the dogs at 8:30pm and was getting Jem hen settled in to her roost for the night. I got a call at 9pm from my neighbor, Skye, who lives on the adjacent road. She sometimes walks her two dogs down to the cul-de-sac where my drive goes off the south side. She said one of her dogs had spotted a white bird on the ground at the edge of the forest on the north side of the road. She had taken her dogs home and returned to look for the bird, not knowing if it was hurt. She asked if I would help search for it, in case it was hurt. I went out, fairly certain it was probably a fledgling, learning to fend for itself, spending its first few days on the ground, its parents nearby. As I neared the cul-de-sac, I heard an adult Robin calling from the trees. My heart quickened- could this be what I suspected? When I met up with Skye and she described the bird, I knew it was: an albino fledgling Robin. I was hearing its parent calling from the trees. I dearly wanted to see it, having never seen an albinos, aside from photos and Nature programs.

We searched the forest a long time, then gave up. It could have gone anywhere. We headed back to the road. Stepping out of the forest, Skye suddenly grabbed my arm. "There it is!" she exclaimed in an excited whisper. Across the road from us, in the low brush was a stunning sight; a pure white bird standing still, regarding us. Skye didn't have her phone with her. She said she would head home so the bird would be less nervous with only one person nearby. She asked me to send photos to her.

I followed the bird discretely, using the zoom on my phone's camera. I regretted not bringing my Sony digital SLR camera along. The bird soon realized I wasn't a predator. It resumed looking for food. From the length of its tail, I deduced it had left its nest four or five days before. At one point it stood still, head cocked, then neatly lunged and pulled a worm from the loose earth. Its parents had taught it well.

I was mesmerized by this bird's beauty. Every feather was pure snow-white. Its eyes were cherry-red. Legs, feet, and beak were pale pink. I mused that it belonged in a Fairy kingdom, as it moved amongst the green ferns, grass, and dwarf dogwoods, the rose-gold sunset sky a perfect backdrop.

The rare bird worked its way into the forest, and I watched it go, knowing it would be heading to roost soon, perhaps being joined by the parent I had heard earlier.

I was only in its presence for about fifteen minutes, but being totally focused on this beautiful creature, time seemed to drop away. It was just me and this wondrous young bird. A sight I would probably never see again. Albino songbirds just don't fare well. They stand out too much and attract predators too easily. A youngster like this was too inexperienced to know what a target it was for many hungry eyes. The chances of it making it past this juvenile sage were very slim. Then it had a long migration ahead to its winter home. The odds were certainly stacked against it. I hoped to see the beautiful bird again, and I looked for it everyday, searching the brush, trees and ground every time I heard a Robin call. But to no avail. I never saw the albino Robin again. I truly appreciate Skye deciding to walk her dogs down to the cul-de-sac that night, and for calling me. It was an extraordinary gift.

On July 9th the heat wave appeared to have started to wane. The high was 79 degrees. At 5am that morning the third Grizzly came by the cabin. It too, knocked over the burn barrel, finding only wet ashes inside. Silly ol' Bear. It was raining by noon.

Things began to change, after that day. The rain settled in. The calendar is marked with "rain" notations on the 10th, 12th, 13th, hard rain on the 15th, rain on the 16th, 18th, and the rest of the week. From then on I circled the rare days its was sunny.

It's been a season of extremes. Hot, dry weather, followed by almost non-stop rain. The blueberry patches I visited produced sparse, small, sour berries. The mushroom crop turned soggy pretty quick in all the rain. The forest floor went from dry and crackling in the dry, hot weather, to becoming soggy and the brush and trees coated with moss from all the rain.

The Bears haven't returned. I hope they don't. I hope they avoid the subdivision and stay in the forest until it's time to go to den for the winter, staying safe. The Fall temperatures have been mild. Freezeup hasn't begun yet, by the third week in September. No first frost, yet. Dare I hope that winter will be mild. We could all sure use a break.