

MOTHERS AND THEIR YOUNG RULE THE WOODS JUST NOW

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This has been an unusually good year to encounter wildlife and their young. It all started with an old hen turkey and her brood. I have since come across three partridge nests and as many mothers with chicks on other occasions. It has caused me to think back over the years to the many experiences I have had with wild young.

I have discovered many partridge nests over the years. One usually has to stumble over the hen before she reveals its location with her departure. This was graphically illustrated to me on one occasion.

A large birch tree was blocking the Big Otter truck trail and I was sawing it out of the way with a chain saw. After sawing it into manageable blocks, I began to roll them out of the road. As I rolled the first block up onto the shoulder, a partridge left her nest not three feet from where I had been sawing.

There were nine eggs in the nest and my children were treated to a look at the old bird on the nest from the truck window the next day. We later checked the nest to find all the eggs hatched. The presence of the truck and who knows how many foxes or other predators that passed by on the road did nothing to deter her mission.

The normal pattern for the hen and her brood when the chicks are first hatched is for the hen to distract the intruder with the broken wing routine. The chicks take cover and one has to take care leaving to avoid stepping on them.

One old girl this spring waded right into me and I had to duel her off with my foot as I made my retreat. This has happened to me before but is not the norm.

I have been startled on several occasions by young taking flight as I inadvertently stumbled over them in their cover. It has happened on several occasions with fawns and rabbits. It can be very disconcerting when your mind is on other matters and it's totally unexpected.

The tune topper happened years ago on the shore of Gibbs Lake. We were surveying the State line west of Gibbs and I was leading the rest of the survey crew along the shore. It was late summer and the footing was obscured by tall ferns and swamp grass. As I stepped from boulder to boulder, an

old mother common merganser with about a dozen young in tow, exploded from between my legs and out into the sanctuary of the lake. I certainly was more surprised and less prepared than they were.

One of my most memorable experiences was witnessed with granddaughter Cindy from our breakfast table. I maintain two duck nest boxes several feet in the air on trees across the Middle Branch of the Moose River from our home.

We had seen a Hooded Merganser entering and leaving one of the boxes on several occasions. On this June 6 morning as we sat down to eat, I pointed out to Cindy the duck perched in the nest opening. In the same moment, she flew down to the water followed by a stream of little ones. Some landed in the ferns on the shore and the rest in-the fast-moving current. One little guy was swept downstream far from his mother and siblings.

As I expressed my concern for its safety, it suddenly sped its way across the surface to join the group and move off with mom.

More on wildlife young to follow...