

OF ALL THE RIVER WILDLIFE THE DUCKS ENTERTAIN MOST
April 2, 2002

The idea for this and for last week's columns began with the spring mating ritual of that fierce little member of the weasel family, the mink.

Mink are slender-bodied, semi aquatic, brown thick-furred, carnivorous, bloodthirsty animals. They are common along water sources like the banks of the Middle Branch of the Moose, on which our home is located.

Mink are seldom seen except during early spring when the males are constantly on the move searching for mates. I know spring is not far away when we see them traveling the riverbanks.

Living where we do, we have an unending opportunity to view mink in their natural habitat. It would be easier to list the species of wildlife indigenous to the area that we have not seen than to list those we have. Off the top of my head, I can come up with moose, loon and bobcat as those we are yet to see. Occurrence of the various sightings varies with the season.

Of the various waterfowl, the mergansers regularly entertain us more than most of the other forms of wildlife combined. When water conditions are right we are able, from our elevated vantage point, to view the ducks coursing after their prey underwater. They usually consist of a gaggle and the successful hunter is hard-pressed to swallow his prize without losing it to another hunter.

It was a Hooded Merganser that gave granddaughter Cindy and me one of the most unique wildlife experiences one could ever hope to see without hours of preparation and observations. Mergansers nest in hollow trees and they readily accept man-made nest boxes

A nest box I made and placed on an iron pipe 10 feet or so off the ground on the far shore was being used by a prospective mother. We had seen her enter and leave the nest box on a regular basis. Early on a June 5th morning while we were eating breakfast an unusual event unfolded before our eyes.

I noted the mother perched on the edge of the entrance and anticipating her decent to the stream, I alerted Cindy to keep watch. We had witnessed the process many times before, but not what occurred next.

She hit the water and circled the box keeping her position in the fast moving current. Almost immediately her little ducklings began to pour out behind her. Some were able to make the water surface while others landed in the vegetation on the bank. All (there were 10) eventually joined her and they trooped on down the river.

As interesting as it all was, there was an even more astonishing incident. One of the flock was quickly swept away by the current and was a long way below the mother as she waited for all to join her. My apprehension and fears that it would become lost were short lived.

With unbelievable agility and speed, the duckling skittered along on top of the current and joined the group.

Compared to the helplessness of human babies and even some other birds and mammals, it was truly remarkable to see how something so recently released from its shell could react so positively.

Our first of many bear sightings thrilled a guest far more than it did the members of our family, who like many North Country residents, have grown up with them.

Visiting in the early evening over a cup of coffee, our visitor was the first to see the bear strolling nonchalantly along the river edge. It was his first sighting ever of a wild bear and he could not get over the fact that it happened while he was sitting in our home.

The combination of woods, seclusion and river are a powerful lure to all forms of life. Both the several species of wildlife and the young grandsons are summoned by its siren song. All are welcome and provide us with immense enjoyment. It does truly present us with a different view every time we look.