

Ring In the New

DECEMBER HAS RUN ITS COURSE. THESE WINTER weeks have brought their light snow blankets on at least three occasions. I'm tempted to use milder adjectives to record the weather patterns that followed familiar roadways into our old Appalachians.

The ice cover on my nearby pond shines with a wet sheen of meltwater. A solid cloud cover has moved in from the northwest. The sun, which offered to warm my little valley early this morning, offers not even a hint of its westerly location now in midafternoon.

My calendar reminds me, of course, that this *is* a new year. It *is* January one, delivered all wrapped in ribbons and tinsel and filled with promises. As a dyed-in-the-wool optimist, I fully expect that most of those promises will be kept.

Let me list a few certainties.

At this moment the usual gaggle of geese, twenty or more, stand idly on the old worn lawn and on the ice-covered pond. They, together with a few crows, have

cleaned up most of the shelled corn that I spread earlier, at their request. I can assure you that when March comes blustering in to my little valley, only two of these geese will remain.

That pair will have seniority—and they will readily enforce it. This pond is their nursery. It was eleven years ago when they raised their first brood here, and their lease is still in force, their rent paid in full. I'm a satisfied landlord.

Four sleek tom turkeys, dressed in iridescent bronze and gold, are coming down the nearby ridge at this moment. This is their feedlot, too. Like bachelors at a local beer joint, they will avoid the numerous hens that claim these same hills and briar patches until spring arrives with a truckload of hormone stimulants.

Then every day will be showtime. Great fantails will spread. Wings will swing like Main Street awnings. Their featherless heads will become chalk white, their throats blood red. It will be mating time, and don't you forget it, all you hen turkeys of the neighborhood.

Right now the pair of old groundhogs are still sound asleep under the foundation of my house. Hibernation, it's called. But come February second or thereabout, they, too, will roll over in bed, look at the calendar, and decide it's time to rise and shine. Reluctantly, of course, judging by their somewhat disheveled appearance after several weeks of bedtime, they will crawl out to reconnoiter the neighborhood.

The pair of barred owls that for several years has claimed a spacious cavity in an old maple tree down toward the main creek will be nesting again when March comes in like a lion—or a lamb. They will notify me

when family time arrives, because this is a very vocal pair. Their *whoo-whoo-whooping* calls will bounce back and forth well into midsummer.

By late March, when tempting morels are pushing up through the leaf mold, when trillium and pale violets add color to the winter-worn palette, I'll walk softly down along the marshes and vernal pools to listen for the chorus of spring peepers and the coughing calls of green frogs. I'll be anxious to find clusters of maroon bells opening on the pawpaw trees along the margins of my old fields. Sweet sap will be flowing in the gnarled old sugar maple trees, and our resident sapsuckers will know it's time to open new rows of holes in the gray bark to serve as tiny fountains.

Morning after morning, soft blankets of fog will fill my little valley. Birdsong will be soft and infrequent until April and May schedule a full round of rehearsals. By January's reluctant end, I know there will be great maroon blooms of skunk cabbage pushing up through the tangled marsh that has slowly, slowly developed below the face of my oldest man-made pond. Not until late April will the great fan leaves of this strange native be dominant among the clumps of lizard tail.

Last autumn, after a wet, wet summer, new colonies of water lilies were apparent here and there in the pond shallows. The floating seeds explore new homesites, transported by winds and mild currents. When another midsummer prompts them to open great pink blooms on the water surface, I'll be reminded of the few ragged plants that I salvaged from older marshes among these beloved hills and valleys and forced their roots into new lodgings in my neighborhood. Obviously, they didn't mind.

So go my wandering thoughts this midmorning of a fresh new year. I feel no guilt for introducing newcomers to this ever-changing haven of mine. Two robust Labrador spruce grow in a pair of open spaces here outside my window. Clumps of giant pampas grass stand tall across the ridge of the dam. Someday, in some far-off year, the pair of bald cypress trees by the spillway will rival their Everglade ancestors in size. Measuring changes in the natural world is hardly a precise science.

But the joy is in the result itself. Already, beyond a doubt, this is a very fine new year, at least as measured by my own choices of rules.

What's your yardstick?