

A Walk in the Woods with County Forester David Falkenham - March 2009

“Spring was high water and life was in the air and winter was letting go of its terrible grip on the northern landscape. Young women yearned for the fragrance of flowers and a warm spring sun. Young men, most able bodied ones that is, were gearing up for the ice to go out, so the spring log drive could begin”. This quote by Judy Ann Parker from her book *Big Snow Little Snow* can only be speaking of the month of March. Ah yes, March is here, love it or hate it we all have to live through it. One day it is warm, rainy and the grass at the edges of the lawn start to reappear, and the next day the north wind howls, your face burns and the patch of grass is covered with five inches of snow.

I love March, for all of its meteorological insanity; March is the month that truly lets you know that spring is coming. This is indeed the best time of year to strap on snowshoes, grab the dog (or dogs) and take a walk in the woods to see just how much is happening. You’ll likely notice the classic signs of spring such as early robins, the morning songs of the chickadees, deer moving in a desperate search for food before fawning season, the early morning smell of skunk, and of course the swollen ice-choked tributaries that feed the Ammonoosuc and the Connecticut Rivers. But what about the other signs of spring that you may not commonly see? Around beaver ponds look for signs of activity. This can be seen throughout the winter where the ice is thin, but can be especially visible this time of year. Through close observation, you can note where beavers have left their frozen quarters in an effort to boost their winter food stores. Sometimes you may find bobcat or coyote tracks near the beaver exit holes. These predators are looking for a quick, high calorie, high fat meal to get them through this month.

It is not uncommon to find bear tracks in the snow as well. These large mammals will often wander around this time of year. Their wanderings are usually short and they end up back in bed for a few more weeks of snoozing until more spring food is available.

If you explore in areas that have high rabbit populations you may be lucky enough to find bobcat tracks. February and March are the breeding season for these elusive cats and if you follow their tracks long enough you may find where they scent-marked their territory, (your nose will tell you where).

In addition to the increase in animal sightings and activities, March is also the month when the first spring rains come, and the water rises so fast the ice-choked streams seem inhospitable. It is hard to believe that less than a century ago this was indeed the time of year when loggers in the woods prepared for the biggest event of their year, the spring log drives on the Connecticut River. These loggers had spent the fall and winter working with axes, crosscut saws and draft horses to cut, haul and land millions of logs and pulpwood along the tributaries of the Connecticut River. Through March and April these logs and pulpwood were cut loose and sent tumbling into the tributaries by the thousands thus beginning the long journey to the pulp and sawmills located along the Connecticut River. Streams that you couldn’t float a canoe down in the summer were used once a year to transport a year’s worth of wood to mills, some as far south as the Connecticut Valley Lumber mill in Mount Tom, Massachusetts.

I am lucky enough to be related to one of these loggers of a bygone era; my Grandfather, Oriel Falkenham, spent a good part of his younger years swinging an axe and maneuvering draft horses through the woods to bring timber to the landings along Perry Stream in Pittsburgh, NH. In the spring of 1920 he joined the log drive from Pittsburg to the Fitzdale mill in Gilman, VT. Much has been written to romanticize the life that these loggers and rivermen led. The story my Grandfather told was a little less glamorous. He spoke of long days in brutal conditions, working in the freezing spring river water up to your belly button all day and then sleeping outside in wet clothes with only a blanket to cover you. He said that the men were so exhausted from the work, they simply fell asleep despite their wet clothes. He

recalled paddling a bateau across the First Connecticut Lake, towing a boom of logs behind the boat and paddling all day until the handle of the paddle was worn slick from his bare hands. "It was the work of a dog" he claimed, "You wouldn't treat your dog like that would you?" I think my dogs are quite happy to be snoozing and snoring inside, while the good old month of March is very much outside where it belongs.

March is also the month when the sugaring season begins. For some this is the true sign of spring when the sugar maples are running sap and steam is billowing out of the sugarhouses sometimes twenty four hours a day. This is another profession/hobby that is often highly romanticized in our minds. Sugaring is indeed very difficult work that often happens during the wee hours of the night. The men and women who are drawn to this pursuit have a very short window of time to tap trees, collect sap, boil and make syrup. But when you talk to these people the glint in their eyes will tell you that they love every minute of it. And who wouldn't, the time in the woods, the smell of wood smoke and the essence of boiling sap are what make this difficult job worth the work.

For information on getting started in maple sugaring feel free to contact any of the County Extension Foresters (in Grafton County call 787-6944), go to our website www.extension.unh.edu, or better yet, take a tour of a sugaring operation in your area. Many of the people who make syrup love to have visitors (it gets lonely out there at midnight). Be careful though, once you get some of these folks talking about sugaring, you could be listening for a long time. It is indeed a labor of love.

Have a happy March!