

## **A Walk in the Woods with County Forester David Falkenham – December 2008**

As I sit down to write this column Mother Nature is showing her ugly side with rain, sleet and snow pelting the north facing window of my office. I just got back from a walk in the woods with my two black labs and although the winter scene was festive and beautiful, I'm quite happy to be inside sipping strong coffee and relaxing.

Despite the blustery conditions, the two old dogs wanted to go for a long walk this morning, so off we went into the icy winter wonderland near Chase Bog in Dalton. It had snowed hard most of the night, then it switched to rain and ice with the temperature dropping. The ice was clinging heavily to the trees and every once in a while a huge pine branch would break like a tooth pick. The sound of it crashing to the ground was muffled by the heavy ice and snow.

During our walk I was amazed at the amount of evidence of wildlife movement throughout the thick spruce and pine stand. It appeared that the barometer was rising and that the wildlife who had been hunkered down for the storm were now moving about in search of food. I found tracks of deer and turkey, not to mention the two ruffed grouse that the dogs flushed. These birds blasted off through the icy forest with complete reckless abandon, shards of ice broke off the branches as their wing tips thundered through the forest. Many of these animals had been bedded down, not eating for close to 24 hours. It was very apparent that they were now hungry and in search of food in the middle of the day. I saw where one deer, a large buck with a very wide set track, had worked his way across the power line near my house. He was scraping up the herbaceous vegetation offered by the opening in an obvious feeding frenzy to replenish his likely severe calorie deficit. If I looked closely at where he placed his head to feed I could see where his antlers had scraped in the snow. Trust me, this was a giant old buck who had survived yet another hunting season, I only hoped he would be able to make it through the upcoming winter. After running himself ragged during the fall breeding season I figured he had a 50/50 chance of making it through the winter depending on how hard things would get.

The birds were on a feeding frenzy as well. Besides the turkey tracks and ruffed grouse I also saw several flocks of chickadees feeding. I love to pause for long periods and watch chickadees to see just how close they will get to me. This often elicits a disgusted look from my dogs, who obviously have better things to do over the next ridge. The chickadees I saw today were feeding on many species of trees, tearing off the flecks of bark and looking for insect larvae. In the coming winter months the seed pods or catkins of yellow birch will also provide a very important food source for many species of birds in this area. The buds of mature aspen trees will also provide an essential winter food source for ruffed grouse.

The ice is now really building up and according to the news reports this ice storm is hammering the southern parts of NH. It reminds me about the severe ice storm ten years ago in 1998. I remember watching the videos of power lines in Canada buckling under the weight of the ice. People were without power for weeks and it looks like this storm could be nearly as bad if not worse.

I remember the 1998 ice storm very well because I was a young forest technician working for the Division of Forests and Lands in the Lancaster office. In Lancaster the storm just seemed like a miserable winter rain storm however the news that night and my walk in the woods the following day told a much different story. My boss and I hiked up to the summit of Mount Prospect in Lancaster and realized that the forest appeared to be in shambles. Tree tops were down every where and they were still coming down for days after the storm. During the weeks and months that followed foresters and loggers across the north east roamed or better yet, staggered, over the ridges and mountains assessing the damage and starting timber salvage operations almost immediately. On state land we salvaged several hundred acres of damaged

timber, the properties that most immediately come to mind were Nash Stream Forest in Stark, Moose Brook State Park in Gorham, Conway Commons in Conway and Gile State Forest in Wilmot. Clear cutting was the most common practice used and with good reason. Many of these stands were damaged so severely that no other silvicultural prescription made sense. The damage at Conway Commons was so severe that where we decided not to clear cut, most of the mature trees were dead within five years. At Moose Brook where the damage was less we tried single tree selection, trying to leave trees that looked like they had the best chance of surviving. I have had the opportunity to hunt through some of these old salvage cuts recently and they are looking pretty good, regenerating to young stands of maple, birch and pin cherry. Trees that were left in the selection cuts have survived for the most part.

My guess is that this ice storm will illicit the same response within the forestry community. Fortunately we have the research from the 1998 ice storm to help us with the decision making process. It turns out that many of the trees that were damaged in 1998 not only have survived well for ten years but they have also managed to put on some growth.

As you venture out to view your land following this storm, remember it may not be as bad as you first think. It is easy to get very emotional about the trees on your land, especially when a natural disaster has occurred, but I strongly recommend that landowners who have damaged timber seek the professional advice of a licensed forester. A licensed forester will help you see the big picture and make a smart timber salvage plan for your property. The salvage operation you do will go much smoother, be more sustainable and be a lot less emotional for you, the landowner, if a professional licensed forester is involved. If you are not sure where to start, contact your County Forester for advice. County Foresters can do a woodlot exam with you, make initial recommendations and help put you in touch with a licensed forester in your county to help salvage any damaged timber on your land. In Grafton County you can contact me at 787-6944 to schedule a woodlot visit.

Enough about ice, I think we will have all had enough of it by the end of this winter. I think I will spend the next two afternoons perched in a tree stand watching the chickadees and nuthatches feed in earnest while waiting for the final sunset of the 2008 Archery Season.