

## The Beauties and the Beast

Nature doesn't know cute! Cute is a very human perception. Cute things can be seen swimming at Miramichi Marsh, the open wet area between Highway 11 and Retirement Miramichi, a wetland restructured only 5 years ago by Ducks Unlimited. Cute is seen in the goslings and ducklings now in their first weeks of life busily eating from dawn until dusk, carefully watched over by a mother in the case of the ducks and by both parents in the case of the Canada Geese. Danger lurks and being cute is no defence. The "cute" was demonstrated dramatically to us recently when, having watched the soft and almost helpless day-old goslings (the "Beauties") trying to figure things out, we had a close encounter with a "Beast", a porcupine. This rodent with a face perhaps its mother loves and a "fur" that is anything but downy is none-the-less a wonder of nature and was interesting to watch as it climbed a small tree with its delicate hands and feet in order to present its best armour to any creature that might be pursuing it. We decided against climbing the tree!

It seems that there is going to be a lot of "cute" in the coming weeks. In the five years since the marsh was remodelled with the help of heavy machinery the development of the flora and the fauna that has followed has been closely monitored by members of the Miramichi Naturalists Club. There has been a very steady increase in the plant and animal life, to the point this year it seems there are as many as 20 breeding pair of water fowl very evident and perhaps many more in the inaccessible reaches of the marsh.

The diversity of habitat and the resulting diversity in wildlife makes the Miramichi Marsh a very rich ecosystem as, in addition to wetland made up of marsh and ponds, there is a mixed forest, open fields and human habitat nearby. We have seen or heard so far this year 45 species of birds, several species of mammals, small fish, amphibians and of course that all important item on the food-chain menu, various insects. Just how busy the Marsh is can be seen easily by day, and the night time activity can be inferred from the work of one of nature's top engineers, the beavers, and the tracks of other animals in the wet soil. The interdependence of the members of the marsh residents is also easily seen. For example the beavers help create more wetland, important for the summer residents but also for the migrating birds passing by. The muskrat lodges provide safe islands for the ducks and ducklings when they want to get out of the water to

rest and cuddle up. Woodpeckers create cavities in dead trees for small birds to shelter.

Although traffic noise from the nearby highway and airport is sometimes considerable it is also possible to enjoy the sounds of the marsh, a noisy place in its own right sometimes. The whinny of the reclusive marsh bird, the Sora, the soft bark-like call of the Pied-billed Grebe, the chatter and whistle of the Red-winged Blackbird, the chorus of the Spring Peepers, the noisy honk of the geese and the more gentle “quack” of the ducks and the subtle calls and songs of songbirds all contribute to nature’s symphony. One of the most interesting sounds is that of the American Bittern which calls out with a repetitive and very guttural “glubbing” sound, made by contorting its body to swallow air and then release it. This sound can be heard throughout the marsh and with luck, a pair of binoculars and sharp eyes, can be witnessed being performed from a distance by the more than two foot tall ungainly but well camouflaged summer visitor.

All of the members of the Miramichi Marsh community are in their natural environment, albeit one that man has contrived. Because of this they rely on their instincts and survival behaviours and it is turning out to be a successful and complex ecosystem for them foremost. Secondary to that, it gives the human visitor a chance to encounter nature and the close observer can have glimpses at its many small wonders.

The Miramichi Marsh includes the Miramichi Nature Trail, a 1.7 kilometre path around the main ponds that is an easy, pleasant walk. Footwear should be chosen carefully because the Canada Geese spend most of their time on this footpath as well. It is very important that dogs visiting this wildlife reserve be on a leash. Be warned, at this time of year the male red-winged blackbird may hover over your head at times, agitated by your passing too close to its well concealed nest.

Two events taking place at the Miramichi Marsh in coming days to which the public is welcome: Saturday June 5<sup>th</sup> starting at 8:00 am the Miramichi Naturalists Club is going to be continuing its inventory of marsh life, Monday June 14<sup>th</sup> the club’s final meeting before the summer break is at the marsh starting at 6:30 pm. For more information visit [www.miramichinaturalistsclub.ca](http://www.miramichinaturalistsclub.ca) .

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