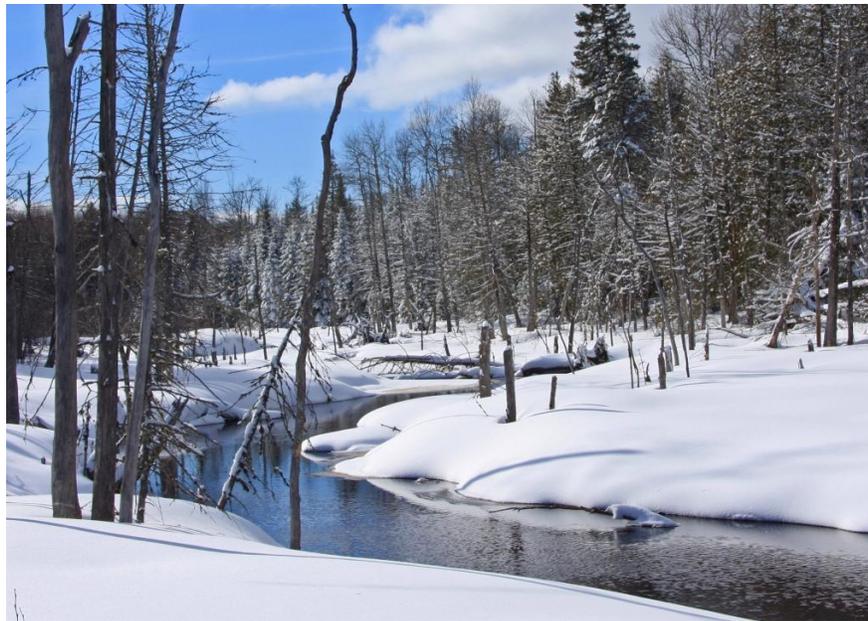


**Warm Blooded Survival in the Winter Woods** – by Deana and Peter Gadd, Miramichi Naturalist Club, published in the Miramichi Leader, February 19<sup>th</sup> 2011

Some mammals cope with winter snow by going cross country skiing or snowshoeing. What a great opportunity to observe other mammals and see clues as to how they adapt to winter. Although the trails at the Miramichi Cross Country Ski Club that we ski on, are inside city limits, in Nelson, the area is home to most of New Brunswick's common mammals. Although the animals themselves are not often seen evidence of their activity, mostly nocturnal, is evident in the tracks they leave in the snow.

Snowshoe hares for instance, are somewhat abundant judging by the footprints and they tend to follow the paths of fellow Snowshoe Hares making a well worn track, just as "snowshoe people" do. They don't seem to mind the deep snow, able to stay on the top and more easily browse tree and shrub branches. The Snowshoe Hare is also known as the Varying Hare as its colour varies with the season, turning white for winter and a light brown for summer becoming less visible to predators. This change which can take a few weeks may not be perfectly timed as snow's arrival is unpredictable. The snowshoe hare sometimes wears the wrong camouflage and becomes easy prey. True wild rabbits by-the-way do not exist in the Maritimes.



Mammal Winter Habitat at Carding Mill Brook, Nelson-Miramichi

Mammalian predators that frequent the club include red fox, coyote, bobcat and weasel and their presence is more often identified by their tracks but occasionally they are seen "in person". Observing tracks in the snow leads you to wonder about possible night time dramas that have taken place in the pursuit of survival. Interpretation though is sometimes quite subjective. For instance canine foot prints that travel in a straight line show intent of purpose, suggesting they are likely to be those of the coyote, rather than a domestic dog which can afford the energy to wonder about in a not-so-straight path. The

distance between Snowshoe hare's foot prints can indicate speed of travel and whether or not the animal was perhaps escaping.

The larger mammals seen in the vicinity of the ski club during winter are deer and moose. The former more likely in open areas, so not usually seen on the wooded ski trails. However in winters where the snow is deep and perhaps crusty, moose sometimes prefer the firm footing found on the groomed ski trails and can damage the trails with their deep foot prints and droppings totally ignoring the "Do Not Walk on Trail" signs. Again, this activity is mostly at night and very rarely do moose come into view when skiing.

Although there is a large gray squirrel population in residential Miramichi, wooded areas of the club are home to only the red squirrel, which can be seen from time to time, particularly on warmer days. Occasionally small piles of pine cone pieces are seen, evidence of a meal having been consumed. A birdfeeder near the club house has been visited by a flying squirrel which is a nocturnal animal, but not one to miss an opportunity for an easy meal.



Red Squirrel poking its head out



Red Squirrel



Flying Squirrel

There are a number of animals that inhabit this urban forest but spend the winter hibernating or living very quiet, energy efficient existences. Certainly there are black bear but they are hibernating, perhaps sleeping in a nearby snow covered brush pile we sometimes think, but probably not. One has never been seen in the area in the winter. The beaver stays in its lodge only leaving to visit nearby cache of wood, protected from the cold water by its specialized fur that keeps its skin dry. Muskrats have a similar protection from the cold.

Mammals are warm blooded and so need a constant supply of energy, so for those not hibernating the food chain has to be maintained. The herbivores such as the hare, mice and shrews get their energy from plant material and when preyed upon by carnivores, pass that energy along. One such predator has been seen near the club house recently, a weasel. Small, cute to the human eye, this little animal can be fierce and has been known to attack much larger snowshoe hares. The weasel, like the snowshoe hare, changes to a white coat in winter and in this state is known as an ermine. Weasels more easily hunt field mice. As does the snowy owl, seen recently at the club. This bird is migratory, visiting from the far north, finding places in the "south" like Miramichi easier to survive the winter.

Snow conditions can have a big impact on mammals surviving winter. Average snowfall is usually makes winter easier for them to survive. Deep crusty snow is difficult for moose and deer, perhaps good for the

coyote. Limited snow quantities deny many animals insulation and cover. When skiing along the trails of the club, animal tracks in the snow are constant reminders that they are about and we are in their home territory. You can't help but wonder how wild warm blooded life can thrive in these conditions, but it does.