

Flora and Fauna Notes 2013

by John Kelly

This is just to give some brief 2013 notes on plants, domestic, and animals, wild. Whether or not a given year or place is demanding of anecdote, I think that over time and with a number of reports, however mundane, something interesting can evolve. I'll start entomologically this year by saying no monarchs remembered, very few Japanese beetles or indoor ladybugs, and little bag worm activity.

As to the animals, we saw a spike in the chipmunk population which was the greatest since our great infestation during the Clinton presidency. That story remains to be told in a further chapter of The Herbivore Wars. At the same time, the house mouse population dropped close to nil. I have no theories as to either of these demographics. Some evidence that the chipmunks got thru the electric net into the garden, but damage was minimal, though pole beans were decimated and might have been plundered by climbing chipmunks or leaping deer. Only one woodchuck sighted, but if it had done the beans [that were not within the net], the poles and strings would have been beaten down while in fact the beans and leaves were rather delicately, albeit thoroughly, ravaged. A good corn crop, but stalks in the center [only] of the patch were broken and ears devoured. The net seemed intact, and I have no certain idea of the identity of the marauders that just might have been deer jumping the perimeter fence and the net though I saw no hoof marks. A limited plundering is not my usual experience, but I'm happy enough to tithe the brutes, if my own mite is preserved.

We always experiment with many varieties of tomato, divided between garden store, hopefully foolproof, hybrids, and heirlooms from Trina's Silver Heights Farm in Cohecton. Always lots of cherry and plum varieties on the theory that they should do better with our short seasons and morning hill shadow. In the beginning of the season we had likely our best crop, ever, of all varieties. Amid leafy profusion, green tomatoes of all sizes, shapes, and bloodlines. But they seemed to glory too much in their own promise and stayed in green mode, and stayed and stayed as the weeks passed. No ripening to speak of till September, and then the ripening and the rot seemed neck and neck to the end. The best tomato in the plot? It turned out to be not a tiny cherry but the classic heirloom, the huge beefsteak, Radiator Charley's Mortgage Lifter, and some related varieties. Almost filled two hands, ripened well, and the best old fashioned flavor of the lot. This has happened before. I commend them to you, though you may get only a couple of fruits per plant.

Coyote sighting are always rare, and we had none this year. In many past years, however, we frequently heard very close by the eerie howling that celebrates kills, and that has been absent now for some years. There was much pack yapping and barking between us and the Beaverkill road all season, however, that I do not believe can have been domestic dogs.

We had the greatest number of bear sightings and the greatest amount of bear spoor that we've ever had. I'd say six or seven bears seen on the premises at various times from spring till fall. Over forty plus years we have seen on the order of .75 bears a year, so this was a significant bump.

You may say that all we really had was one bear seen numerous times. Some truth maybe, but not total. On one occasion in fact we saw two adolescent appearing bears charging anxiously, one after another, across the meadow right in back of the stone wall that marks the extent of the lawn. Possibly chasing an unseen mother who was in process of decisively shuffling off her maternal duties. Adult bears of seemingly different sizes were seen on the road, loping across the meadow, rummaging beneath an apple tree, and, finally, wandering across the lawn and ending fumbling the compost heap. I do not accuse the heap, however. Our life style, modest by any reckoning, has not changed—slowed down a bit maybe--and we're reasonably careful about the animal matter we compost, incinerating some scraps and bones, and, even, taking some particularly delectable morsels back to the city for disposal. A little bacon grease, some uneaten chili, and a number of unidentifiables, slightly fuzzy, from the back of the fridge---can hardly have drawn this year's crowd.

Bear droppings were ubiquitous on the lawn and in the meadow. Spoor somewhat more obscure, and even outré, also began to appear. In early spring when the gas refrigerator was on the blink tightly closed plastic bottles of mayonnaise and salad dressing put for cooling in the spring appeared on the bank totally empty but with nearly ¼" round holes punched neatly around the neck. Later in the summer we placed a number of gallon plastic jugs of Poland Spring water in the spring—an arguably redundant sort of arrangement to be sure, but some of our younger and more fastidious guests prefer their spring water trucked in from a certified commercial producer—and after a few days these disappeared and were later found on the other side of the pond, still sealed but half empty, and with the familiar large punctures around the neck. Clearly a bear, lacking some judgment and I am sure highly frustrated, but one with laudable consumer instincts.

In the barn—close to the compost cages—there were several cardboard boxes containing rolls of “contractor bags,” the big, thick black bags we use for trash in the City [and

used to use at the Elm Hollow Transfer Station until, for obscure reasons, the fee for black bags became twice that for transparent ones. [It may be to discourage use of the Station for the disposal of body parts.] Each roll contains scores of 5' long bags which you tear off the roll to open and use. The bear had entered the barn, had bitten into the roll and apparently could not get his teeth out of it, as I found a shiny black trail of the unrolled bags going maybe 20 yards up the hill and into the woods. The topmost bags bore, as expected, the familiar neat punctures.