

February 2010: Natural History By Car

While a passenger on a long drive to Boston recently, I realized that even in winter things can get interesting out the window. Paying a little attention while watching the world go by can greatly improve a road trip, and feels better than just sleeping the trip away. By keeping your eyes open, you might awaken your body *and* your mind.

Of course, my first interest is always birds. I'm fond of tallying the number of red-tailed hawks I see perched in trees along the highway, love picking out those bulky hawk bodies with the diagnostic dark "belly band," recognizing that imperious look of a creature surveying its domain. My personal record is 15 on a six-hour drive from Camden to Burlington, Vermont.

I've had even better luck with eagles, but that entails a special side trip on Route One in Warren past Last-Stop Poultry. The St. George River valley is one of the premiere gathering areas for off-season eagles. (Another well-attended winter eagle convention can be found Down East near Cobscook Bay.) Dozens of bald eagles of all ages hang out in the trees around the poultry farm and its abutting fields, transforming rural Maine into a scene right out of the Chilkat River delta in Alaska. Because it takes bald eagles about four years of molts to attain that white-headed and -tailed adult plumage we all recognize, seeing so many birds in one place offers a unique chance to study up on their more confusing juvenile feather patterns. But you don't have to be a hard-core birder to appreciate a tree full of eagles. Possible bonus points: ravens and hawks often accompany the eagles, and last year a rare black vulture spent the winter at the poultry farm.

Route One crosses a lot of water, both fresh and salt, providing further birding opportunities: the Marsh River Bog Preserve in Newcastle sometimes harbors hooded mergansers, as does a little pool just this side of the Taste of Maine restaurant. An inlet north of the Wiscasset bridge is a prime spot for buffleheads. Peregrine falcons often hang out year-round near bridges, as in Bath and Topsham, scoping out the pigeons that huddle together in silvery flocks. Where 295 crosses water in Falmouth and Portland's Back Bay, sea ducks can easily be seen bobbing and diving throughout the cold season. Come spring most of these ducks will head back to the Arctic, but for now, eiders, buffleheads, goldeneyes, and mergansers can often be seen and readily identified even at 50 miles per hour.

The many farm fields one passes on most any road in Maine often host flocks of turkeys, also good for roadside entertainment. And counting crows can keep one occupied for hours in any habitat or climate—sometimes they're the only bird I see for a hundred miles. But birds are only part of the fun. When the bare skeletons of the trees are fully exposed, playing "name that tree" gets a little easier. That may sound absurdly nerdy, but in my opinion it beats singing "100 Bottles of Beer on the Wall" or playing the license plate game.

Deciduous trees in winter reveal their postures, their textures, the full shape of their naked branches. Clumps of skinny black locusts with grooved bark raise

high their wriggling arms. Lone red oaks stand guard over old farm fields, their broad crowns of twisting branches dangling remnant leaves like crisp dry hands. Smooth grey beeches flaunt fluttering strings of small brown leaf pennants. White birches look especially stark against the snow, showing their true bones. Bending gracefully over rivers and along the edges of flood plains, willows define the reaches of water. Here and there the trunk of a fortunate elm that has thus far escaped Dutch elm disease rises straight up to its spreading broom top. Thickets of staghorn sumacs lift up their clusters of fuzzy red fruits like offerings—which they are, for hungry robins and waxwings. And this being the Pine Tree State, the soft bushy branches of pine trees—as well as the darker, sturdier looking boughs of compact spruces and firs—provide contrast almost everywhere, helping to soften the wooded edges and inject some longed-for green into our roadside vistas.

A trip down the Maine coast can also remind us how the whole state is vertically striated by its rivers, like stretch marks, echoes of the ancient glaciers. Damariscotta, Sheepscot, Kennebec, Androscoggin, Fore, Mousam, Saco, Piscataquis—each one was once a watery highway leading early settlers deep into the forested interior. In the bleak midwinter, ice floes drift, heave, and clutter these rivers and shallow inlets like frozen puzzle pieces trying to come back together. Gulls shine above the white face of the winter waters. Cold light filtering through their wing feathers transforms them into creatures more pristine and angelic than they really are. And somewhere down below those frigid waters, fish drift. I think of the giant sturgeon that in summer heave and spin their whole bodies out of the Kennebec. What are they up to now? Catching smelts, like the ice fishermen in their rows of shacks?

Maine towns sprung up around its waterways, but they were built on its bedrock. If birds, trees, rivers, or just admiring the exposed contours of the February landscape aren't enough for you, you can always watch for road cuts. When I studied geology in college, half our field trips were to road cuts. What better place to study the solid bowels of the earth exposed? My favorite was a shiny phyllite cliff in southeastern Vermont studded with low-grade garnets. I haven't seen anything so dramatic in Maine, but there are, for example, some attractive road cuts along 295 between Falmouth and Brunswick that showcase the Vassalboro formation. This mineral layer cake of dark schist and light granite was, according to *The Roadside Geology of Maine*, exposed by the Norumbega fault series. If I remember my New England geology correctly, this fault zone was an artifact of the Acadian orogeny, or mountain-building event, that happened over 350 million years ago.

So on your next long winter drive, if the weather affords you the freedom of being able to sit back and watch the landscape go by, you can amuse yourself by pondering the natural world on many levels. Enjoy the ephemeral moment of a crow in flight above your car, the more static lives of long-lived trees—tight red buds of maples beginning to rouge the forest—or the seemingly eternal bedrock that channels rivers and bounds our highways. It's all good.