

## MESSAGES IN THE SNOW

BY JAMES J. COLLINS

If you want to experience the American frontier, wait for a fresh snowfall, strap on a pair of cross-country skis as I did and go out into the New England countryside. Enter a silent age with the primitive woodland in its infancy. Man's influence now hidden may never have happened. Snow shrouds everything, and the white blanket covers the ravages of man. The litter, the plowed and eroded fields have their wounds bandaged and concealed from the eyes of the observer.

Two hundred yards from a main road, the sounds of traffic disappear and the shrill cry of a bird disturbed by a human intruder is the only natural sound detected. However, sound contaminates the crisp silence; the sound of your skis slicing over the powdered snow, like breathing, cadenced, labored, a sound that belongs yet is foreign. Another sound arises, that of your poles striking the snow like the tap, tap of a blind man, which we office dwellers are when placed in this primeval wilderness. Crunching sounds, alien to this wild world, occur when your ski crushes a patch of snow that met the sun and refroze. Your skis descend below the surface of the powdered snowdrifts with just the tips showing, sending little puffs of snow up in front of you. It appears as if a pair of animals is moving under the sea of snow ahead of you, spouting like miniature whales in this ocean of white powder.

The only signs of life are the tracks seen on the new fallen snow. Like silent sentinels, they report the passing of animals in the not too distant past, and if studied carefully, tell tales and record tiny dramas acted out around us every day. Mouse trails, under the snow, show up as faint dark tunnels interspersed with small openings where a mouse broke through to look around. The openings resemble manholes in a sewer system but are correctly identified as mouse holes. Mice and chipmunks have nibbled at the tops of grasses they can now reach using the snow as a platform.

In search of these mammals, a fox scours the territory. Ominously, the track of a fox wanders from cover to cover pausing at the point it crosses a mouse trail. Then the fox prints move off in the direction of the visible mouse track. Where the mouse track reenters the snow, the fox has dug up the snow until she encountered the frozen ground. Small tufts of brown grass show on the snow near the hole she has dug. Frustrated, as told by the tracks, the vixen went away without her quarry.

Crossing a large open field my wandering takes me close to a finger of ancient trees that protrudes into the center of the field. A large hawk, unnoticed in the massive pine, suddenly drops out of the tree and his broad wings beat to gain altitude. He must have watched my approach for several minutes and finally decided that I was coming too close for comfort. I am pleased that I have come so near and wonder why the predator waited so long. Normally a hawk will not let a human get this close. The sound of two wing beats reaches my ears, and then he is gone, soaring on an air column.

Thirty yards further on I spot a small dun colored feather on the breast of the snow. It is no larger than a dime with the texture of gossamer. Around the feather is the slightest of depressions, as if the feather were warm when it landed on the snow or it absorbed the heat of the sun and melted a little of the powder. Maybe the wind moved the feather here, worked around this miniature obstruction, and blew the powder snow away, creating the hollow. Another ten yards further, I encounter another feather, the mate to the first. One feather is an anomaly birds

drop them at times, but two in a small area forewarn of tragedy. I search for the origin of the feathers by circling into the wind for the wind blows feathers in a specific direction. Ahead a small dark spot on a little rise in the field is apparent. It is a subtly different color from the grasses that poke their heads above the snow. Investigating, I find the crime scene with the pitiful remains of the victim. A small tufted titmouse has been the main course for some predator; all that is left are feathers arranged in a little irregular circle. They are torn and tattered and two small drops of blood diffused into the snow are apparent in the midst of this carnage. There are no bones and every speck of meat is gone.

I look for the tracks of the vixen, but she has not passed this way. No tracks lead to the scene and that fact speaks eloquently to what transpired. The hawk spotted a small bird in the field and surprised it with a lightning strike. Then it tore off the breast feathers to get at the meat. Worried about the prowling fox, the hawk took its little meal into the pine for safety. Now I know why the hawk waited so long. It was dining.

I continue on my journey across the little field and encounter yet another memorial, a diffused bloodstain about the size of a silver dollar in the middle of a clear patch of snow - again no tracks. I wonder what animal met its demise on this battlefield. Then I notice the small seeds mixed in with the blood and the mouse hole two feet to the side. The hawk or its mate fed again. Now the open field takes on an ominous tone. It is a killing ground for hawks. They sit in the trees so they are not visible to the small creatures that inhabit this acreage, and they use their magnificent eyesight to locate and track their prey. Once they spot prey, they swoop down out of the trees and silently kill their targets. Then they carry the small corpses up to the top of the pines so they can dine at their leisure in safety.

We forget the little panoramas acted out each day without our knowledge, and we have drifted away from the essence of nature. It is too bad, for it diminishes us as living beings. However, you can go back in time to an age of primitive beauty. It is as close as the nearest open field right after it snows. Put on your skis, dress warm, move slowly, watch the snow for tracks, and read the news of tragedy and success in the new fallen snow. Two or three trips will heighten your awareness, and you will look forward to a spiritual reawakening during the snows of winter.

THE END

1145 WORDS