

Fina



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Pet Sounds

By Lucy Muller

Finally, I can see that spring is actually a possibility. This has been one of the worst winters I can recall. I love snow, but it kept coming and coming and coming. Then the ice underneath seemed

to be so stubborn and dangerous. On Sunday, we had warmer southern air and loads of rain. I loved it, because once again I could see the good, brown earth.

Another sign of spring, up here on the mountain, is the sound of mating. Boy, is it loud! I am not kidding. Turkeys set up a loud commotion when either mating or fighting over someone. Have you ever heard raccoons getting romantic? It is usually late at night and you would think someone was being killed. Well, it is all part of nature and it is the sound of life continuing. Squirrels have had their babies by now; so have owls.

As I share some knowledge of wildlife, I also have the sinking thought of thousands of new kittens on the way. This is not a happy thought, because of the lack of homes for all the sweet, beautiful little cats. I would ask people who have plenty of property if they could find it in their hearts to feed the cats who show up, try to tame them, and get them shots and spayed/neutered. I know it is not your responsibility, but the alternative is to take cats to shelters. A kitten will probably be adopted, but the older ones probably will not. A life in a cage is no life.

Lug Nuts

Did you realize what wonderful programs for dogs there are at Rondout Valley Animals for Adoption? Here's just one: Lug Nuts is a program that organizes and hosts informal weight pulling contests. It was created in response to the increasing problems communities are encountering with dangerous dogs. It offers youths and their dogs a competitive, macho sport that is not harmful to the dogs and promotes humane training and handling," according to the RVAA website.

There is also a mobile spay/neuter van, located at their compound on Route 209, that offers low/cost or free spay/neuter to pets of Ulster County residents. The shelter is located at 4628 Rt. 209, Accord, NY 12404, 845-687-7619.

No Parole For You!

A few weeks ago I asked everyone to email or write to the Kentucky Parole Board to keep a rotten apple in prison. Russell Swigart was up for parole for animal abuse. He was charged under a law called, "Romeo's Law", because he killed two cats of a former girlfriend. Kentucky sent him to jail for 12 years in 2009. He tried to be released, but thanks to thousands of signatures on a petition and calls, Swigart was denied parole!

We do not need anyone this cruel on our streets, whether here or in Kentucky. It is bad enough that he was threatening a woman, but to take it out on her pets, is a special kind of sick. This kind of person is also a serious threat to humans.

Elephants

If you want to learn about a wonderful place right here in the U.S., go to The Elephant Sanctuary of Tennessee on the web. These fabulous people take in old elephants from circuses, zoos and theme parks. It is so interesting and heartwarming to learn about the elephant's friendships and intelligence.



Lucy Muller

Nature's Bounty

By JJ Murphy

Winter Foraging: The Art of Ice Fishing



JJ Murphy

At first, there seemed to be no tension on the fishing line, but as I continued to pull, I could feel the tug of the wriggling yellow perch. Moments later the fish lay on the ice.

Using a surgeon's forceps, Richie carefully removed the hook and the uneaten bait — a minnow — from the perch's mouth. In a few hours I'd be learning to fillet this fish. But at that moment,

the black-striped yellowish fish, with orange and gold-tipped fins provided an accent of color in the monochromatic world of ice, skeletal hardwoods and overcast skies.

When my friend and fellow nature writer, Jim Capossela, invited me to go ice fishing, I enthusiastically accepted this opportunity to learn a new skill. In almost all places you need a fishing license, but in this area you must also obtain an access permit for outdoor activity on watershed lands.

We arrived at Muscoot Reservoir, in northern Westchester County, early. Jim loaded his sled with his tackle box, two buckets which would also serve as seats, an ice spud for testing ice thickness, a type of ice drill called an auger that was taller than me, and a small pack with water and snacks, and walked out onto a huge expanse of ice. I tagged behind him carrying my day pack with water, snacks and extra socks.

The weather was ideal, windless, not as sunny as predicted, and the first mid-50-degree day since last autumn. As I took in the sight of this frozen wonderland, Jim attached what looked like an over-sized slotted spoon to his belt.

Jim chose a spot to drill a hole in the ice with his "corkscrew" auger. He detached the skimmer from his belt and used it to clean the slush out of the six-inch-diameter hole. The ice was at least 18-inches thick. Jim reached for a short rod and reel and attached a lure called a "Swedish Pimple." He expected to catch yellow perch and bluegills, but with the possibility also of white perch, pickerel, crappie, and maybe even a bass or a trout.

Jim lowered the four-pound fishing line into the hole until it touched bottom, then wound up the line until there was no slack. He told me that thick ice sometimes kills off the aquatic plants that attract fish. His strategy is to start at the bottom and raise the line a few inches at a time, since some species prefer bottom and other species are found suspended just below the ice.

There was something peaceful and meditative about Jim as he waited for a sign of the fish taking the lure. He would occasionally tug lightly on the line, explaining that the subtle movement would attract fish. He also watched his line, since many fish barely disturb the line when taking the "bait."

I would observe, as the day progressed, that the ice fishermen drilled a number of holes and circulated among them, since fish often move singly or in schools. There are also periods of greater and lesser activity during the day.

Soon after we were set up, John, Charlie and Richie arrived, each tugging a sled with even more gear, including "tip-ups," buckets wrapped in carpenter's aprons filled with gear, and a nifty little gadget called a "fish finder" that instantly reads the depths of the water and sometimes even shows the fish. John lowered the device into a hole in the ice to reveal several fish as well as some of the topographical features of the reservoir bottom. The fish finder even showed some of the aquatic vegetation that John hoped would be there.

Each man surveyed the ice as Jim had, and chose several spots to drill, many of which would be outfitted with a "tip-up": a spring-loaded device that releases a flag when a fish has taken the bait. The tip-ups were baited with a type of minnow called a "shiner."

These sportsmen may be rock stars of the ice fishing world, but they were sincerely welcoming, inviting me to try my hand at drilling (a lot more work than I realized, considering how easy they made it look), baiting the hook, and even trying my luck "jigging" (fishing with a pole).

Charlie advised me to give the line a bit of a tug to "set the hook" after the fish bites, before reeling it in. The only tug I experienced was the tangled aquatic plant called Eurasian milfoil that I hauled up. On my first day I got a true appreciation of the skill and practice it takes to develop the "feel" that seems second nature to people who have been ice fishing since childhood.

Sometimes, when all four men were jigging and the "tip-ups" were all set, the reservoir felt like Nature's winter cathedral. At one point, John, Charlie and Richie decided to fish near a downed, partially submerged tree. In theory they should have been successful, but on this day the fish didn't bite.

I noticed that when the fish did bite, they seemed to do so in flurries. I was impressed when Jim caught several fish in a row. He sat there, with fish flopping at his feet, focused. I could only imagine the state of bliss that kind of "oneness with Nature" induces.

Jim's premonition about catching multiple species in this productive reservoir held good. During the course of the day I got a good look at a pickerel that was caught, several small crappies, and one largemouth bass that had to be returned to the water, since it wasn't bass fishing season.

Jim and I packed up about 4:30 p.m., but the others were settling in for more fishing. John suggested I dump the fish we were taking home out on the ice and snap a photo.

We walked back to the car through a couple of inches of slush. Jim assured me this was snow that had fallen after the reservoir froze, creating a thin layer that thaws and freezes. He was confident the ice was thick enough to support the weight of a car.

This was one of those magical days of being engaged in an activity that makes outdoors time fun. I have added more of the photos I took during the day to my portfolio.

Nature is fickle. The next day brought gusty northwest winds and plummeting air temperatures. But this one-day reprieve in an otherwise stormy winter brought the promise of spring and enough time to immerse myself in the wonders of nature.

Writer and naturalist JJ Murphy offers creative nature curriculum, wild food recipes, fiction, poetry, articles and writing services for individuals, entrepreneurs, small businesses and ecologically aware companies. Check out JJ's portfolio at www.WriterByNature.com, *Giving Nature a Voice*.

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