

A Mink in the January Thaw by Coralee Bodeker

In the early 1940s, the American conservationist Aldo Leopold took a winter walk on his farm in Sand County, Wisconsin. There had recently been a “night of thaw when the tinkle of dripping water is heard in the land” in Leopold’s neck of the woods. Today, instead of a single January thaw, it has been a *thawed January*. Since the first of the year my yard in Iowa has been locked in what seems like an eternal thaw, filled only with the sounds of running water and the squishing of mud underfoot.

Unlike Leopold, however, I haven’t observed any animals “*prowling the wet world*” outside my windows on this January day. Not a single bird has flitted past my feeders—perhaps due to the lack of snow cover a trip to the feeders seems pointless? No deer or turkeys have crossed my yard, either, but both are probably lurking deep in the woods with thoughts of spring on their minds. Even the mischievous squirrels, who never miss a chance to gorge on my sunflower seeds, have failed to appear today.

Despite an apparent absence of outdoor life, I, like Leopold, decided to go on a January stroll this morning. As I walked along the gravel drive I kept my ear cocked for bird calls, but all I heard was the gurgle of nearby Prairie Creek. All around hung the peaceful silence of winter. As I neared the lane, a single Red-bellied Woodpecker flew over, announcing his presence with a long squeaky chatter. But silence persisted thereafter.



By the time I reached the Prairie Creek crossing, I was (for once) glad of the lack of something—a lack of ice! The previously-frozen December creek was now swirling and bubbling like a true river after a northern snow melt. I deduced there might be some form of life congregating along the now-dampened banks and began to climb the small cliff that ran along it. Scanning the lower branches of the juniper and hickory trees, I convinced myself I might spy an elusive Saw-whet Owl if I just looked hard enough. Or maybe a few paddling ducks.

With no owl nor duck materializing and no bird calls reverberating off the cliff, I was now grasping at straws. I continued to look up until a splash caused me to look down. Out of the corner of my eye I caught something in the water on the opposite bank. I trained my gaze over the moving creek and spotted a small animal well-camouflaged in a tangle of exposed roots. I focused my binoculars and to my surprise found a mink staring back at me! A mink! I have only ever seen a mink in the wild once before and never from a mere few yards away. His rather pale brown coat looked soft and dry even though he must have just climbed out of the water. His tail remained dipped in the eddying murk beneath him. This lengthy January thaw was quite possibly a cause for much rejoicing on the part of the mink as his historically ice-locked Prairie Creek now stood open. I slowly moved to stand, continuing to watch the mink through my binoculars. The mink remained still, two front paws balanced on the root below him. Perhaps he thought I had not spotted him? After a couple seconds, however, he began to move, pacing back and forth on the root tangle, seemingly looking for a path of escape.

The noontime clock began to beckon and so I turned for home. I pondered how incredible it was to observe such a secretive animal so close. Mink are hidden right under many a nose here in Iowa, only occasionally spotted, but often with much astonishment by those who understand the mink’s secrecy. I wondered how long this mink had lived in my creek before I stumbled upon him today while grinding for winter birds...



Aldo Leopold’s January stroll afforded him multiple encounters with hibernators leaving their winter lairs amid the temporary thaw. Needless to say, I did not encounter the same volume of wildlife on my stroll. I deduce the feeling of a perpetual spring this year is causing many animals to remain unseen and I treasure my mink sighting all the more. In the words of Leopold, “*things hoped for have a higher value than things assured.*”