

Brother Shrew.

By Conrad Vispo

It was, as I recall, a leaf-covered hillside along a back-country road. Neither someplace remote and exotic, nor a place settled and mundane. Perhaps it was a rustling in dry leaves which first drew my attention. I definitely wasn't there searching for shrew packs, yet that is what I found. Shrews are small mammalian insect-eaters, ranging from the size of a mouse down to that of our largest beetles. They have pointed, agile noses and small, almost hidden eyes. Here on the East Coast we have, broadly speaking, two kinds of shrews: the larger Short-tailed Shrew - which, given its apparent poor flavor, is often a cat's stoop gift - and the tiny Long-tailed Shrews, rarely seen creatures frequently weighing no more than a nickel. It was a pack of the latter which I came across as they swarmed through the undergrowth like a frenetic, animated breeze.

One rarely sees a single Long-tailed Shrew alive, let alone a group. The event was unusual enough to warrant publication of a brief natural history note. What were they doing? Were they really a 'pack' (that is, a cohesive social unit)? Or, were they more of a mob (that is, a collection of individuals brought together by a specific event)? Who knows? We found some evidence that they may have been feeding on a mass movement of insect larvae, but we could not confirm that. They knew why they were there, I could only guess.

Some years later, I spent several winters studying the winter ecology of Ruffed Grouse in northern Wisconsin. Ruffed Grouse are a feathered teapot of a bird which resides mainly in young northern (and Appalachian) forests. We occasionally see or hear them here in Columbia County. Being a non-migratory herbivore, they try to make a winter living by short, hurried bouts of tree-bud plucking interspersed with long periods sheltered in snow or evergreens. It is, in our eyes, a harried life, always balancing the need for food against the risks of predation and heat loss occasioned by the tree-top feeding forays.

We followed the lives of these birds by putting radio collars on them and then finding them weekly to record their habitat use and diet (via the droppings they left on flushing). Although this work was sometimes punctuated by the drama of a kill site, where hawk or fox filled their hungry belly, one of my most vivid memories is, instead, of the fine lunch spots a Ruffed Grouse could lead me to.

Midwinter in Wisconsin can be COLD, with temperatures regularly dipping to -25°F. At those temperatures, stopping for lunch during my grouse-seeking hikes was often not tempting, but the grouse would do their best to help me out. I remember one day when, having ploughed through deep snow and chill, I found a grouse resting on a wind-sheltered, south-facing slope being warmed by a low sun. Here was an unexpected spot of quiet comfort. How did the grouse find it? Did it 'appreciate' its luck? Did it return there daily? I do not know; all I could do was project my own feelings of good fortune.

Most recently, we spent a few late-autumn days by the Atlantic. Hardly swimming weather, but the long sand beaches were nearly empty and the ocean lively. Seals bobbed in near-shore waves, casting curious glances at man and dog toying on the edge of their world. "Peeps" scurried on blurred legs along the fringes of the surf. And, although it took us a while to notice them, there were also more distant whales - here, a dorsal fin poking through the surface; there, a misty spout; and, occasionally, a colossal breach. However, the most obvious flag of whale activity was not the whale itself but its seabird entourage. The birds, it seemed, would come close to landing on the whale's back as they hurriedly descended on its point of rising. This was probably not motivated by selfless friendship but rather hunger. The whales were probably driving small prey to the surface, Perhaps

through so-called bubble net feeding. Rising through the bubbles, they would grab their own great mouthful but leave many confused prey for their avian followers. This gentle, loose whale rhythm of dive – rise – feed - dive seemed to slowly drift away from us, accompanied by its flock of observant birds.

Are the whales conscious of the birds they feed? Is breaching a whale's laugh or does it have some calculated function? What does a whale feel as it dives below the surface – unease or peace? Or, rather, does it just day dream? Whales are perhaps one of the most fitting symbols of the animal unknown. So large, so apparently complex and yet often so hidden by, literally, fathoms of privacy.

During these days of what are, in some ways, our most animated holidays, these festivals of being alive, perhaps we can spare thoughts not only for the lives of other humans, but also for the lives of other animals. Perhaps we can feel not just concerned compassion but also, and perhaps primarily, wonder at the tantalizing ties that bind our being to that of the wandering shrew, the lolling grouse or the breaching whale. May we celebrate our oneness while walking consciously in its mystery