

Introduction

TWENTY YEARS AGO, on a Fourth of July weekend, we—my husband, Bruce, our three small sons, and I—discovered our mountaintop home-to-be. Desperate to live in the country, I had called dozens of realtors within a twenty-five mile radius of Bruce's new job in central Pennsylvania and had learned of a very isolated house in the woods that no one was interested in.

I assured the dubious realtor we *were* interested, and I managed to cajole directions to the place from him. Thus we found ourselves creeping up a narrow gravel road cut into the side of a steep mountain slope which followed the meandering of a small stream. Vegetation pressed in on either side, and we drove for what seemed like miles through a dark tunnel of foliage.

At last we saw sunlight flooding a large meadow ahead of us. We emerged into a clearing dominated by a white clapboard house set on a knoll, looking, with its pillared veranda, like a miniature Southern mansion. Below it stood a white-washed stone springhouse. A smaller, older house with board-and-batten siding and six-pane sash windows was the first of three buildings on the opposite side of the driveway. Directly above that house was a long narrow lawn leading to a shed with a pointed roof topped by a cupola. A matching cupola adorned the much larger bank barn across the barnyard from the shed.

The impact of that first look immediately convinced all of us that we had to buy the place. By the following week we were the proud owners of the old Plummer estate which included 162 acres, more or less, of woods and fields. Later we

discovered a variety of mini-habitats to explore along miles of well-kept trails that crisscrossed the mountaintop.

Each of us formed our own attachment to the place. Our eldest son, Steve, continued his passionate interests in bird-watching and insect-collecting. David, our second son, nurtured his poetic nature through a lively appreciation of the beauty around him, and Mark, the classifier, found his niche by keeping lists of every plant and wild creature living on the mountain.

My husband became a champion of trees and specifically of the lush, second-growth forest on either side of our mile-and-a-half access road up what is called Plummers Hollow: old hemlocks and beeches, white oaks, and tulip poplars. When the beauty of the hollow was threatened by absentee land-owners who wanted to lumber its steep slopes, first he fought them to a standstill and then purchased 350 more acres of mountain land to save it from the chain saw.

But of all the family members, I was the one most obsessed with the beauty that surrounded us. I was out in all seasons of the year, compulsively recording what I observed of the natural life of an Appalachian mountain, first in a journal, then in local newspaper columns and magazine articles, and finally in my first book. Without, in fact, ever planning to be one, I found myself a writer—a naturalist-writer, I always hasten to tell people whenever they ask. To me the nature comes first, the writing second. Writing is merely a tool I use to tell others about the wonders of the natural world.

It seems to me that no wild areas can be permanently saved unless people appreciate and understand a little about nature for its own sake and not for what they can take from it. For centuries humanity existed in what I call the first stage, exploiting the natural world beyond its limits to reproduce. Then most, but not all of us, moved into the second stage where the buzz word became “harvest.” To harvest properly,

land and its wildlife had to be managed, and since only “harvestable” crops—trees, game animals, and fish—were considered, the survival of “non-useful” plants and creatures was incidental.

Today a few of us are moving slowly into the third stage, that of empathy with all of nature for its own sake. Although we call ourselves “environmentalists,” the less sophisticated and often derisive title of “nature-lover” is probably more suitable. What, after all, has humanity held as the highest good but love, pure and unselfish—the kind of love that most religions on earth urge us to feel toward our fellow human beings.

We “nature-lovers” take it a step farther. Love the earth, we exhort. To know the earth better, to grasp a little of its workings, to look on it with awe and wonder as well as with respect is to want to save it from destruction. Yet our numbers are still minuscule in comparison with all those who would milk the earth for their own profit. “I see mature trees,” one lumberman told us, “as a field of corn, put here by God for man to harvest.” To him a managed world is a beautiful world.

There is no doubt that my own piece of the Appalachians has been and will continue to be managed in part by us and by the laws of our state. My husband cuts our large First Field on a four-year rotation, managing not for domestic crops but for wild plants and animals. He also keeps our paths reasonably mowed, our road reasonably clear of debris, and our Far Field half in meadow flowers, half in locust trees. We do not post our land against hunters, not because we believe in hunting but because we know that our state overmanages the deer herd. If I had my way we would bring back the natural predators, but that is no longer possible.

What *is* possible is the further saving from destruction of pockets of wild land by people who watch rather than manage

the land, who make no demands other than the right to have such unmanaged land available to them. For those kinds of people, as well as for those who are still in the second and first stages, I have written my own love song about the place and season on earth I love the most.

*Appalachian
Spring*

Prelude



The advent of a North American spring is still the greatest show on earth, a show so compelling that I never turn it off, a show whose preliminaries begin, in fits and starts, soon after New Year's Day on the first clear day in January. As I stand at the top of First Field, bundled against the cold, I watch the light flood across the landscape, setting the field ablaze and casting long blue shadows in the woods, and I realize that the worst of winter—its early, dreary dusks and late, gray sunrises—has passed with December's passing. Already the upward spiral toward spring has begun.

Early in January I hear the first intimation of spring. Great horned owls are courting on Sapsucker Ridge, their calls echoing down across the silent, moon-drenched, winter fields. First come the alto tones of the larger female, then the answering bass notes of the male. Those penetrating "who! who! whoo-who!" calls have tremendous carrying power, and I hear them through the walls of my winter-tight home. I rush outside to listen, summoned by the first pulsating reminders of imminent spring.

No matter the snow, wind, and cold of January and Feb-

ruary, the great horned owls will go about their appointed business of courtship, mating, and egg-laying. They mate for life, and both parents raise the young. By mid-February, in our state, the female has laid her two to three white eggs in the abandoned nest of a red-tailed hawk, crow, or squirrel high in a tree. She broods them while the male keeps her fed and occasionally relieves her on the nest. The eggs are incubated for a little over a month, and the young spend another six to seven weeks in the nest. By the time they fledge, spring has truly arrived, but the leaves have not yet emerged. This makes hunting prey easier for the inexperienced youngsters.

The mountain ridges here have what wildlife managers call second-choice habitat for great horned owls—small white oaks and beeches. Because these trees retain many of their leaves throughout the winter, they provide excellent camouflage for resting owls during the day. In the hollow, where they also live, the habitat is even better because it contains two of their favorite nesting and perching trees—white pines and hemlocks. Studies show that their favorite prey animals are white-footed mice, meadow voles, and cottontail rabbits, all of which are abundant here. They also prey on the smaller barred and screech owls, as well as mammals such as porcupines, skunks, squirrels, weasels, woodchucks, rats, and shrews. In fact, great horned owls are opportunists where food is concerned, and one wintry dusk I watched an owl struggle to lift one of my Muscovy ducks which fought so valiantly that the “feathered tiger,” as it is sometimes called, gave up and flew off.

Because great horned owls are at the top of the predator chain on the mountain, they have no natural enemies. Up until 1965 they were fair game at any time of the year, but then Pennsylvania discontinued its bounty on what was perceived (and still is by many) as a menace to the game wildlife population. Yet they continue to be shot despite federal laws against shooting any birds except game birds in season or Eu-

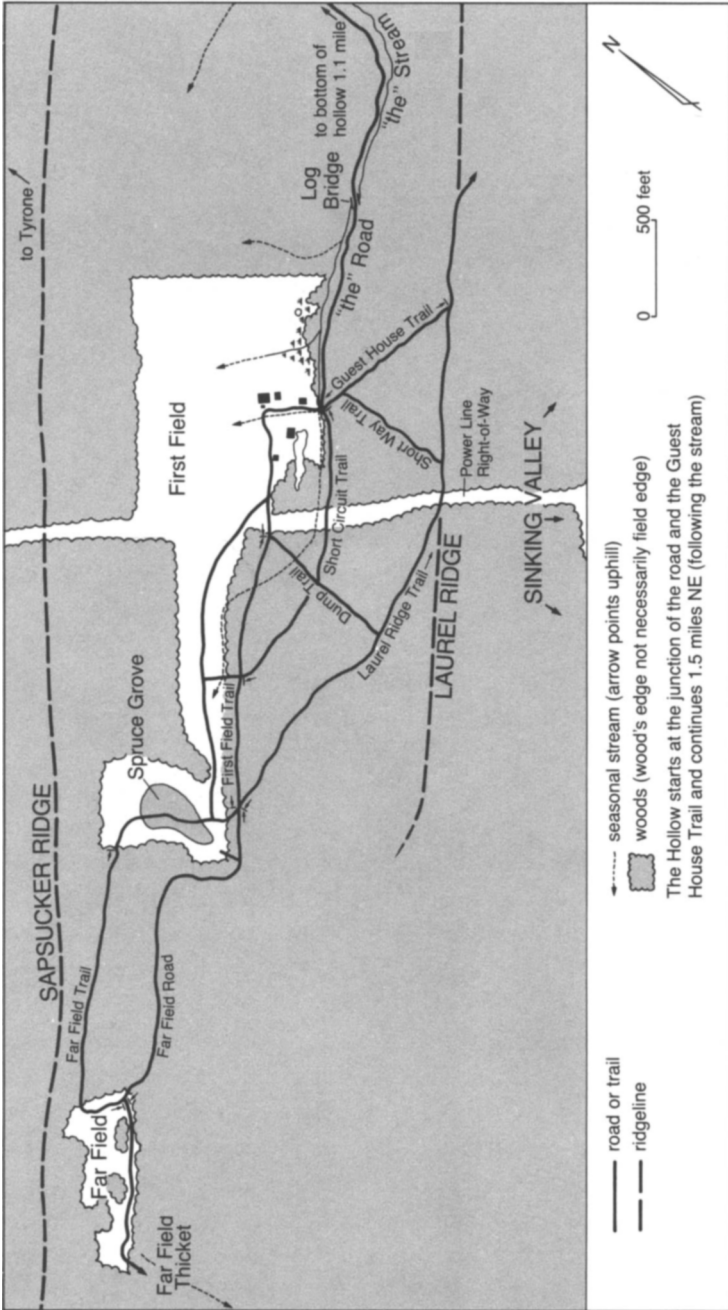
ropean starlings and house sparrows. They are also susceptible to poisons, which they ingest through the birds and rodents they eat, which in turn have eaten poisoned insects or bait. Automobiles, trapping, and flying into telephone and electrical wires are other hazards. The two dead great horned owls I have found here had their necks broken by the electric line that stretches from the garage to the barn.

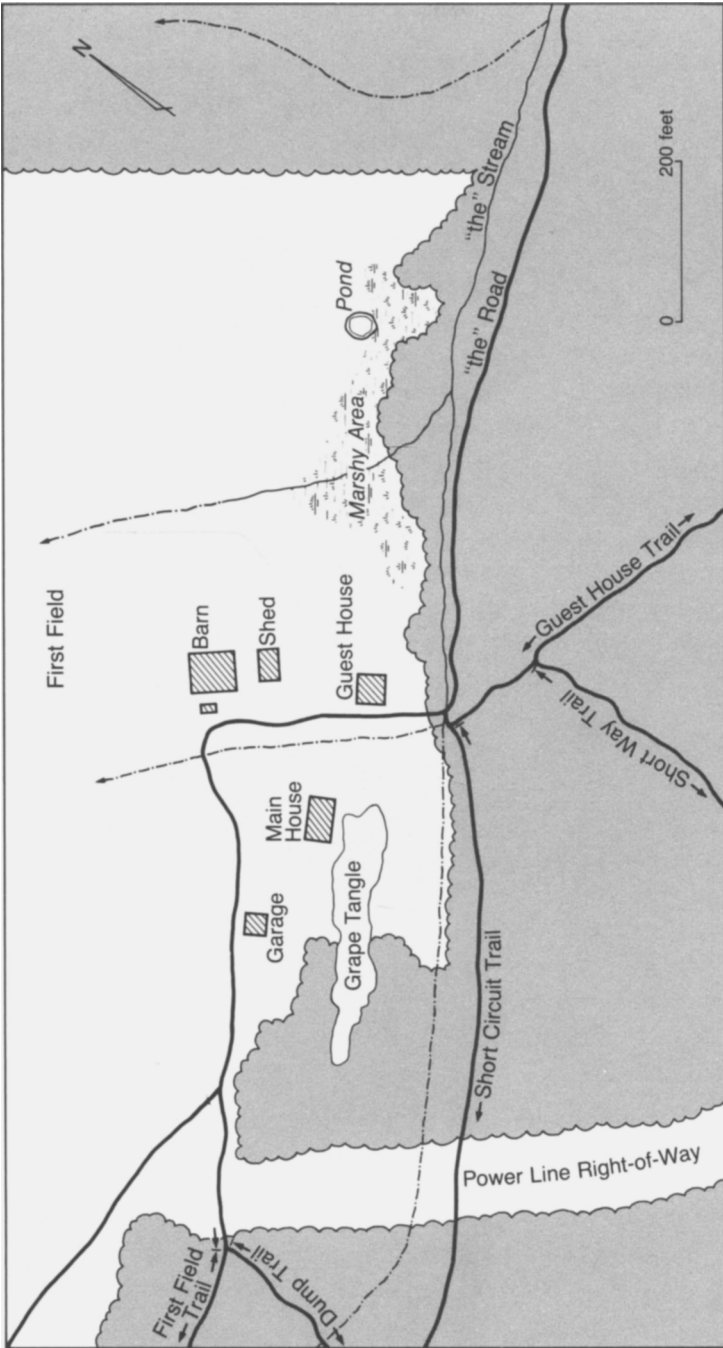
Despite those two deaths, the mountain is never without its great horned owl population. Any empty niche is quickly filled by young birds that must find their own territory and mate. Those calls I listen to also establish territory, help to renew pair bonds, and momentarily frighten their prey, making them more vulnerable to capture. Without the voice of great horned owls to break the winter silences and remind me of the imminence of spring, my life here would be greatly diminished.

Early one morning in mid-January as I stand on the veranda, a certain feeling in the air tells me that this day will be warm—a January thaw is in the offing.

Our home sits tucked into a small hollow between two ridges. The sun rises behind Laurel Ridge, and before we can glimpse it from the house its first rays burnish the treetops of Sapsucker Ridge with a reddish glow. During a January thaw the dawn light is scarlet as it moves down the ridge and across First Field, and I go out to meet it. I sit with my back against a locust tree at the edge of the field, bathed in warm sunlight, while the house below me is still in shadow. In patches where the snow has melted, the exposed dried grasses are covered with frost crystals shining in the light and adding glitter to an already glorious scene.

Except for the springlike sound of an occasional “peter-peter” from a tufted titmouse down near the house, I have a silent vigil beneath the locust tree, memorizing as best I can the warm touch of sunshine and the constantly shifting, glow-





ing light around me. When at last the sun's rays reach the house, I rise and follow it homeward, feeling I have begun the day in the best possible way.

The thermometer rises rapidly in the warmth and by mid-morning it is fifty degrees. Once again I pull on my boots and head outside, eager to absorb as much sunshine as possible. It looks like spring, with the ground thawing and the red maple buds a swollen glow against the ridges. The view from the mountaintop is shrouded by a springlike haze. It smells like spring, moist and muddy, and it certainly feels like spring.

But most of all it sounds like spring. The lone wintering song sparrow in the grape tangle sings its spring carol over and over, and pileated woodpeckers in the woods keep up a rapid-fire drumming unlike the usual random hammering noises they make in winter when searching the trees for carpenter ants. Instead of one tufted titmouse giving its call, the woods echo with titmice song. The black-capped chickadees change their "dee-dee" calls to their clear "fee-bee" song. My heart rejoices, "It's spring"; but my head replies, "Only January."

Only January, indeed, and only a January thaw to lift my sometimes winter-weary spirits. But it is a promise of more to come, and I fall asleep that night with the sound of flowing water in my ears. Spring music!

Much of what goes on in the animal world is hidden from me; but in winter, animal tracks in the snow make it possible for me to know when the red foxes are courting or the male woodchucks are wandering in search of females. Several times, though, in late January, I have also been given a ring-side seat to gray squirrel courtship.

I remember one such time particularly well—a thirty-degree, clear, and beautiful morning with two to three inches of snow on the ground when I set out on my usual three-mile, late morning walk over the mountaintop trails. The woods

were silent except for a mixed flock of brown creepers, white-breasted nuthatches, and black-capped chickadees that I encountered where Laurel Ridge Trail merges into the Far Field Road. The latter is a flat jeep track winding above a wooded hollow which offers me, especially in winter, a clear view below of grapevine-entangled oak woods and fallen trees. The wild creatures seem to love this road as much as I do, and it is always riddled with the tracks of white-tailed deer and wild turkeys, red foxes and gray squirrels. Often I see those animals on the trail ahead of me, but I never hear them. So I was surprised when the silence was broken by unknown animal noises in the woods below the road.

Immediately I sat down on a fallen log facing the sound and traced it to three gray squirrels frolicking in a large tree. Gray squirrels, according to Joseph F. Merritt, in his *Guide to the Mammals of Pennsylvania*, are not as noisy as red squirrels, but they do have alarm calls which include barks, grunts, and possibly even a song. They also talk among themselves in light chuckles that sound almost musical, as described by Doult, Heppenstall, and Guilday in their *Mammals of Pennsylvania*. But the sounds I heard could only be described as begging noises, and as I watched I decided I was observing courtship rites.

Gray squirrels are usually solitary creatures, but during mating times (here on the mountain in January and February and again in June and July) several males will chase a female in heat. In this case, it looked as if two males were vying for the attention of one female. For several minutes they seemed to be chasing for the sheer fun and exercise of it. But then one squirrel suddenly paused on a branch face-to-face with a second squirrel and slowly flicked its tail like an undulating wave. The third squirrel scampered on down the tree trunk and ran off into the woods, leaving the two remaining squirrels to continue the chase.

With the disappearance of that squirrel, the chasing slowed

down. The longer I watched, the more the chasing resembled a stylized dance, like ballet, with every motion known ahead of time by the participants. Not only was the chasing slow and graceful but it was punctuated with long pauses, when one squirrel (the female, I presumed) would lie out along a branch with her tail flat over her back and head while the other squirrel would climb to a branch directly above and peer down at her. The first pause lasted five minutes and was broken when the prone squirrel climbed up to face the seated squirrel for a silent second or two, then clambered several yards back down the tree to another, much lower branch.

Before it settled into the same prone, tail-over-body-and-head position, it made a noise like a plunked banjo string, and the other squirrel sat up more alertly. Silence and stillness for close to ten minutes prevailed before the stylized, slow-motion chasing resumed, this time accompanied by whimpering noises. As they chased, their bodies rippled underneath as well as on top of the branches, reminding me of furry serpents.

For the third time they stopped, returned to their respective branches and positions and an even longer period of stillness. And then the scene was abruptly ended when the third squirrel suddenly streaked back up the tree. All three squirrels ran to the ground, squeaking like overgrown mice, and disappeared into the brushwood.

As soon as I returned home, I searched the literature for accounts of gray squirrel courtship behavior and learned only that gray squirrels always disappear when they see people; consequently, no human has ever witnessed gray squirrel courtship. But I had been sitting out in the open, had shifted around and even moved to a more comfortable log, and had had the distinct impression that the squirrels had known I was there and had not cared. I was disappointed that I had seen no actual mating so I could not be positive about what had been going on, but the books did say that gray squirrels al-

ways mated in the privacy of their nests. All I can do is assume what seemed obvious to me and to hope that someday my observations will be duplicated by a bona fide biologist. Apparently to have shared such moments with gray squirrels is a privilege granted to very few people.

Great horned owls and gray squirrels are not the only creatures preoccupied by procreation in January. One night a foot of snow falls and once it clears the wind still howls, forcing me to walk down the hollow road which is reasonably sheltered. Carefully I poke along in the fresh tire tracks my husband made earlier on his way to work. I quickly discover that the tracks are being utilized as a pathway by winter crane flies or snow flies (*Chionea valga*) which, on cursory inspection, look more like spiders than flies. According to Ann Haven Morgan's seminal book on animals in winter, these flies often walk over the snow during mild winter days, having crept upward from hiding places at the bases of tree trunks as the temperature rises during snowstorms. Once the sun shines, the light entices them to crawl over the snow in search of mates. After copulation, the females bury beneath the snow to deposit their eggs close to tree trunks.

By February, spring is definitely on the move although we have robins with us every winter so I no longer consider their presence a reliable harbinger of the season. But when I hear them singing, as they do in early February, I know that spring is coming on. Add to that the first cardinals in song as they eat the last of the wild, bittersweet berries growing at the upper edge of First Field and I feel more and more certainty that winter's back is broken. Many of our wintering birds, like me, react more to the lengthening light than they do to the still wintry temperature.

Then one afternoon, as I sit reading *American Entomologists* beside the warmth of the woodstove, a ladybug, more cor-

rectly called a ladybird beetle, crawls across the page. Knowing of this creature's very unladylike ferociousness toward the aphid world, I tenderly scoop it up and deposit it on my aphid-infested Christmas cactus. Among our most common insects, ladybird beetles are members of the family Coccinellidae which, appropriately enough, is Greek for "scarlet," the color of most of the species—including the one that interrupts my reading. Apparently encouraged by the warmth in the room, this beetle has crept out from hibernation and had coincidentally landed on my book about insect lovers.

Mid-February, and I am out every day watching for red fox sign. During my first fifteen years here, I had only a passing acquaintanceship with red foxes—a glimpse of one hunting in First Field one early spring morning, the sight of crows mobbing another on the Far Field Trail, a face-to-face meeting that startled both the fox and me on Laurel Ridge Trail—nothing, in fact, but the frustratingly brief encounters that humans so often have with wild animals.

For several years, though, I had been aware of what looked like the remnants of an old fox den above an isolated, overgrown field that we call the Far Field. The den faces south and is several hundred feet uphill from the beginnings of a mountain stream. So I kept a careful watch on it, looking for fox sign, and after years of hoping, I was rewarded late last March when I discovered fresh digging there. After that, I went daily and stealthily to the Far Field.

Then early last April, as I stood gazing across the old field at the den, an adult red fox emerged from the hole. Luckily the wind was in my favor and the fox never saw me. It sat down and scratched itself, then stood up and looked around. Finally, it poked into the den exit and I caught a movement. Could it be kits? I was not to know that day because as suddenly as the fox had emerged, it slipped back down into the den.

The following day, as I rounded the first curve in the Far Field Trail, I came face to face with a red fox, probably out hunting food for its family. It veered abruptly and bounded off in a zigzag pattern, while I continued on to the Far Field. Walking slowly down the edge of the field, peering through my binoculars at the den site, I spotted an adult fox sitting outside the den, only this time it was accompanied by two handsome kits, still wearing their charcoal gray, natal coats. Quietly I sat down in a black locust grove beside the field edge to watch the little family and soon verified the sex of the adult when the kits began to nurse. As I steadied my binoculars on my knees to better observe the action across the hundred-yard field, the kits pulled away from the vixen and started exploring by climbing over fallen branches in the vicinity of their den. The vixen, who alternately paced and reclined, watched them, and once she stopped to groom a kit. I remained glued to the spot, unwilling to move even when it began sleeting, but at last they all went underground and I walked home in the worsening weather, elated to have finally discovered an active fox den with young kits.

I did not see them every day, but with each sighting I learned a little more about the family. At ten o'clock one morning, I found the female outside with *four* kits. They played with each other and with her, and although she moved around occasionally, she seemed to be unaware of my watching, hidden as I was by the locust grove. Later, in the early afternoon, the kits, guarded by the vixen, poked about in the brushwood outside the den, jumped on each other and sometimes on their parent. Then the dog fox trotted up and lay down and the vixen retired to the den, while the kits continued playing for another fifteen minutes until they also went underground.

By the sixteenth of April, the kits were still charcoal gray, but already they were learning about food. One of the adults had a carcass in its mouth which it offered to any kit that came

near, but although each kit would make a feinting movement as if to grab it, it would always back off at the last minute. Apparently, it had been designated as a plaything because they never did eat the carcass and, after a while, they ignored it altogether, seeming to prefer exploring further uphill or tussling with each other. Scientists will say that they were working, learning how to live in a complicated world, but to me it seemed like children's play—a good deal of fun with some learning mixed in.

To my distress, that was my final look at the foxes last spring. For weeks I feared that they had been killed, since red foxes are hated by many people. Although foxes occasionally eat the creatures—rabbits, ruffed grouse, wild turkey—that humans want to hunt, smaller prey—chipmunks, meadow voles, and insects, as well as wild fruits and the carrion of larger animals such as deer—still forms the core of their diet. After several days of searching, however, I found a second occupied fox den in a secluded grape tangle less than a quarter mile from the Far Field den, so I was hopeful that the little family still survived. Foxes often have more than one den and move their kits back and forth depending on conditions.

So this year, knowing that foxes mate for life and that vixens usually reoccupy the same den, I am looking for the tell-tale double tracks of a male and female traveling together which I know signal the onset of red fox courtship. I also visit the Far Field den for signs of occupancy. To my delight I discover an adult red fox scratching itself as it lies just outside the old den entrance hole. Then it settles back to snooze in the sun. I ease myself over to the melted edge of the field, slip off my snowshoes, and sit down on the snow, cushioned a bit against the cold by the hunter's "hot seat" I carry hooked on my belt during the winter months.

I peer through my binoculars at the recumbent fox, but all I can see is a motionless, red, furry ball since the fox has its head tucked under its chest. Even when a flock of crows fly noisily over, it does not stir.

Eventually the cold drives me to my feet, and slowly I strap the snowshoes back on and move down along the edge of the field. The fox sits up alertly and stares in my direction just as two ravens croak their way over the ridge. Silently the fox and I eyeball one another across the field. Then the fox rises to its feet, lopes up the hill, veers sharply right, and disappears over the far crest of the field.

What a wonderful, long view I have of that beautiful animal running over the snow. Its burnished red coat against the white and black of the woods is the most colorful sight I have seen since the autumn leaves fell. Visions of fox-watching dance in my head. This spring will be even more wonderful than last, I tell myself.

Three days later a warm wind comes in overnight and by eleven in the morning it is sixty degrees on the back porch. Crows caw steadily across First Field while a pair of ravens sport with the wind. The singing titmice, cardinals, and song sparrows are joined by the pensive “poor Sam Peabody, Peabody, Peabody” of the wintering white-throated sparrows.

Later a tumultuous downpour makes a start in clearing the mountain of snow, and when I step outside I am suddenly enveloped in blackbird noise. One hundred red-winged blackbirds have landed on two locust trees outside the house. I stand transfixed, absorbing the first, tentative “okalees” of the returning males. For many years we had one breeding pair that made a nest in First Field and brought its youngsters to drink at the driveway ditch, but normally they will not remain to breed because our mountain does not provide proper swampy habitat for them. Since I never banded the ones that stayed, I can only wonder if they were a family that retained, year after year, the ancestral memory of our place as home and if they had finally all perished, leaving no red-winged blackbird with any knowledge of our mountaintop.

Every February, when the red-winged blackbirds visit, we hope that another pair will establish a family here. The boys

even planted cattails in the low, wet area of First Field as an inducement several years ago. The cattails have spread, but the blackbirds have not taken the bait. Studies show that red-winged blackbirds are the most abundant bird species in all of North America yet they, like the other so-called pest species—the house sparrows, common grackles, and starlings—refuse to breed here. I, for one, miss their calls, so reminiscent of wet, mysterious places, and eagerly await the spring when once again I can hear them on a daily basis.

By late February the striped skunks are courting. Although they retreat to communal dens in what the scientists call “carnivorean lethargy” during the most severe weather, the males are out and about as soon as the weather moderates.

The males are polygamous and travel widely in their quest for females. They are also liable to be a bit out of sorts. Competing males growl and claw at one another and sometimes even release some of their noxious spray in the excitement. Usually I catch my first whiff of “woods pussy” perfume at the top of First Field. For the next couple of weeks the males will wander from den to den in search of receptive females, all of whom come into heat for a period of four to five days and are as polyandrous as the males are polygamous.

Mating is a rough affair. The male unceremoniously grasps the female’s neck with his teeth and mounts her from the rear. Once the matings are over, the female builds a den which usually consists of two, twelve-foot tunnels leading to a chamber three feet underground. She lines it with up to a bushel of dried grass and, after a sixty-three-day gestation period, gives birth to four to six sparsely haired, blind and scentless kits. It is two weeks before they grow hair and still another week until they open their eyes. At that time they are able to assume a defensive posture and emit a small amount of noxious scent.

Their mother takes scrupulous care of them, keeping them clean and weaning them at between six and eight weeks of

age. Then the kits are ready to follow her around on evening hunting forays. While some finally leave their mother's care at the end of the summer, others may stay with her until the following breeding season.

Those who have kept pet skunks have found them to be endearing creatures. Yet most people fear and hate them because of their overpowering defensive scent. Even their scientific name, *Mephitis mephitis*, means "noxious odor." Since skunks are found only in the Western Hemisphere, early explorers were amazed at such creatures and decided that the smell they emitted had something to do with their excretory habits. The highly sulfuric n-bulymercaptan chemical is contained in the anal glands, so this mistaken idea is easy to understand. On moist days, the odor can be smelled more than a mile away, but surprisingly the oil in the glands has been refined and used as a fixative in perfumes.

Of course, the skunk does not use its ultimate defense weapon unless it is sorely pressed. First, it stamps its front feet as a warning, then it rudely turns its back, lifts its tail, and finally shoots—accurately aiming for the victim's eyes at a distance of fifteen feet. Temporary blindness, for up to twenty minutes, can result, but washing the eyes with water will take care of the problem.

Whenever I have run into a skunk, I have been struck by its total lack of concern with me. Actually, skunks have such poor eyesight and such confidence in their defense mechanism that they walk along, nose to the ground, more interested in finding food than watching out for predators. During one mild morning in February, I noticed a skunk moving quickly along the base of Sapsucker Ridge and I paralleled its path at a distance of less than twenty feet until it disappeared into heavy brush, its preferred habitat. I don't believe it knew I was there. Last summer one walked directly across my path less than ten feet in front of me as I stood frozen in place.

Few animals prey on the skunk. Only great horned owls

and barred owls, with poorly developed senses of smell, find them delectable. Otherwise, humans are their principal predators, poisoning, trapping, shooting, or gassing them in an attempt to keep them away from their homes and beehives. Skunks appear to be immune to bee stings, and in the years when we kept a few hives we did see evidence that a skunk had visited occasionally. But their favorite insects are mostly those which we would like to get rid of—gypsy moth caterpillars, potato bugs, Japanese beetles, crickets, and grasshoppers. Other popular foods in season are wild berries, small rodents and rabbits, dried fruit drupes, carrion, and garbage.

Altogether the striped skunk is a creature to be enjoyed for its beauty, which is what I do whenever I am lucky enough to see one.

In late February the male woodchucks are also out in search of females, and every woodchuck hole in the fields and along the Far Field Trail has fresh tracks going in and out.

This is also the time for our annual visitation by American kestrels. I say visitation rather than return because after several years of raising families in the power pole halfway across First Field, the American kestrels have only been paying us brief, early spring visits before settling on valley farms to nest. But during their February visit, the male's "killy-killy" rings from the field, and there, on the top of the old nesting pole, he sits and surveys the scene around him. When I walk up the field toward him, he flies to the edge of the woods where he lands on a tree branch and calls several more times. As I approach still closer, he flies across the field, calling loudly, and alights on the topmost branch of a white pine tree.

At precisely the same moment, a female comes swooping down over the power line right-of-way from the Sinking Valley side, answers the call of the male, and flies over to the power pole where she lands for a few seconds. Then she

moves over to a second power pole which she touches down on briefly. Finally she flies to the male in the white pine, hovering over him as if she is greeting him.

At last she spirals high up in the sky where I lose sight of her. After a few minutes the male, still calling, flies back across to Sapsucker Ridge. Although most of these pretty little falcons, once misnamed “sparrow hawks,” migrate to the southern United States and northern Mexico in the fall, some do winter in pairs in the northern states. I have no way of knowing whether the pair I saw are early arrivals or have been wintering in the valley, but hearing their calls does bring back memories of their nesting days here when the whole family coursed noisily back and forth over First Field on the hottest days in late July and early August.

Finding chipmunks out and about is still another late February discovery. They always choose a mild day to replenish their stores and practice their “cuck-cuck” calls. Chipmunks are not true hibernators because they waken every several days to eat from their store of seeds and nuts cached in their underground dens. The only month I have not seen chipmunks at least once in the woods is January; a few of them nearly always appear whenever the weather moderates. So on this last day of February, chipmunks appear along with warm sunshine and a blue sky studded with clouds racing along in a pre-March breeze. I can step now from winter into spring by walking from Laurel Ridge, still covered with four inches of frozen snow, to the First Field, Sapsucker Ridge, the Far Field Trail, and the Far Field itself, all of which have warm southern exposures where much of the snow has already melted.

I am drawn to the base of Sapsucker Ridge by what sounds like a mixed flock of blackbirds and pine siskins. But all I find are eighty or more pine siskins running over the snow-free ground, giving their usual goldfinchlike calls as

well as the blackbirdlike, buzzy sounds I first heard. Occasionally they swoop up into saplings in response to warnings I cannot hear or see, and I sit to watch as they resume their running and pecking in the ground. White-breasted nuthatches and downy and hairy woodpeckers are also climbing up and down the saplings. I am surrounded by birds going about their business and ignoring my silent, bemused presence; some come within ten feet of where I stand watching. After a half hour I move on, leaving them to their exuberant work.

Later I sit at the edge of the Far Field when a fighter plane suddenly screams low across the field, barely skimming the treetops. In fact, from where I sit, it seems to be flying through the trees. Its flight disturbs a red-tailed hawk perched on the ridge and it flies up out of its cover, heading in the same direction as the jet, looking like it is being pulled into the plane's wake.

Red-tailed hawks are also mostly migrants, and that is the second sighting I have had of one this week. To add to my bird-of-prey sightings I watch both a Cooper's hawk and two turkey vultures flying along Sapsucker Ridge this morning. Our ridge is one of the migrating bird-of-prey ridges both in the fall and spring since it runs for hundreds of miles north to south, the northernmost ridge in the ridge-and-valley province of the eastern United States.

Such a day of warmth and chipmunks, pine siskins and birds of prey has set the stage for the event which is about to begin—the debut of a true Appalachian spring.