

The Zen of Winter

By Rob Bettaso

Robert Fulford once said: "I have seen the future, and it doesn't work." In my more cynical moments, that sounds about right. Recently I was having such a moment, no doubt from listening to too much news. Lucky for me, relief from media overload is had simply by walking out my front door and taking a stroll in the woods nearby.

We had had some significant rain in December and, as a result, I had been forced to take my daily walks along the local two-lane blacktop and gravel roads as the forest trails were too soggy. Five minutes on a trail resulted in giant mud pies becoming part of my boots' Vibram soles. Christmas might have been dubbed "high tide at the Yuletide" except that on its eve we providentially received about four inches of powdery snow -- just in time to give us a White Christmas in the White Mountains.

Precipitation in the arid Southwestern United States is nearly always welcome but in the wintertime, I for one would rather have snow than rain here in the High Country. The way I see it, if I'm going to be cold, I would just as soon have snow to play in. Besides, in several regards, snow makes wildlife viewing easier than rain ever could.

For example, in snowy conditions you can often see tracks regardless of what kind of terrain you are traversing. Additionally, you can detect tracks made in the snow from a much greater distance than you can see tracks made in wet dirt. Animals also stand out much more against a white background than they do against almost any other (unless, of course, it's a white animal but, obviously, in Arizona we don't have arctic hare or arctic fox, nor polar bears, ptarmigan or snowy owls).

In winter, non-hibernating animals are also forced to feed more as they are burning a greater number of calories in the cold conditions. This means there is more activity for us to notice in the woods. On the other hand, shorter winter day lengths decrease the number of wildlife viewing opportunities unless you care to stumble through the icy woods in the darkness of the night.

On Christmas morn, I was eager to strap on the old boards for my first cross-country ski outing of the season. Unfortunately, the conditions were such that my ski waxes just weren't up to the task and, after an hour of 100% exertion with 0% fun, I called it quits and went snow hiking instead.

While I did see plenty of rabbit, rodent, bird and ungulate tracks crisscrossing the trail, I saw very few critters other than common bird species and the occasional bunny. As I had received a kind invitation to Christmas supper with my friends and former colleagues Mike and Pat (and their kids and other guests), I decided that I would return to the snowy woods the next morning

at one of the best times for wildlife viewing -- first light. That, as we all know, is also typically the coldest time of day.

I awoke that holiday Monday (Kwanzaa Day, donja know) absurdly early and when the clock rolled around to 4 a.m., I decided that sleep was not likely to return and that I might as well start my day. I was sore from the previous day's skiing foray and had also strained my back chopping wood. I cranked up the space heater in my room so that, by the time I finished making coffee, it would be toasty warm as I wanted to attempt some stretching in the hopes of un-kinking the knotted muscles in my lower back.

Within 30 minutes, after the morning's first energizing cup of coffee and after as much downward/backward/and sideways dog as I could manage, I felt good enough to start a hike. The only problem was that it was still only 9F outside and blacker than tar pitch.

As frigid as the outside temperature was, I figured that I should stoke my internal furnace with some extra high octane oatmeal. I commenced to boiling water and stirred in rolled oats, raisins, blueberries, butter and cream. I chased it all down with a second cup of Arabica blend and in no time felt ready to scale Everest.

So far, I was still in what the sporting goods stores are now calling the "base-layer" of clothing. As I considered my apparel options for the day, I remembered talking to an old friend (Chuck) a few weeks back about what was his favorite aspect of winter. His reply: layering up in ultra-warm clothing, stepping out into severe weather and feeling invincible against the cold. Chuck went on to say that when he was adequately dressed for the weather, he liked nothing better than to walk out into the deep Michigan woods, stand motionless among the tall trees and watch the forest come to life. He called it a Zen experience and I immediately knew precisely what he meant as I had done the same exact thing many a time in Michigan, Montana and other cold climes in which I had lived.

The Swedes have an expression that gets to the same point: "There is no bad weather; only bad clothing." With these thoughts in mind, I began to don various articles of fleece, wool and down. By the time I stepped out into the morning darkness, I had six layers of apparel around my torso alone and felt a bit like the Michelin Man.

But late December temps at nearly 7000 feet elevation are no trifling matter here in Arizona and, as I searched the eastern sky for zodiacal light, I could feel the malevolent cold slice into my airways and right down into the pit of my lungs. Best to assume a humble attitude in the face of old Maw Nature in all her sublime winter glory.

I lingered a while in the darkness of my front yard; naked aspen trees as still as death by my side. I hoped to hear the throaty hoots of a great-horned owl as, back when I raised chickens, I had an owl that frequently perched on my neighbor's eaves watching my hens as they made their first rounds in the early morning twilight. But now, all was silent...and very, very still.

Eventually, the first faint signs of night yielding to day appeared in the sky and I set off on my hike. I had a place in mind along the Mogollon Rim that I expected to reach with just enough time to see the sun puncture the horizon. The snow crunched under my boots and the neighborhood lights made the snow sparkle like a universe of cold blue stars.

The balaclava that was one of the layers protecting my head was causing my eye-glasses to fog up, forcing me to spread the opening in the fabric to allow better ventilation. This, of course, also gave the piercing cold open access to a small portion of my face and in no time the skin began to numb so I accelerated my pace to generate greater body heat.

Before long, I reached the Rim Road and was soon surrounded by evergreen forest. The dim light conditions, coupled with almost preternatural stillness and silence had an eerie effect on my perceptions of the world. In my Michelin Man get-up, I almost felt like I had left planet Earth and was now walking on the Moon or was Highway I-60 fathoms beneath the sea's surface?

Periodically, as I ascended a slow but steady incline, I would turn to look back toward the growing light in the east. Since climbing the hill was also causing me to warm to the point of perspiration, I unzipped a layer and stood to watch the kaleidoscope of evolving colors above the tree-tops. During a winter's dawn, a moment in time can encompass an entire lifetime of colors both seen and imagined. As I stood in rapt attention, what I was lucky enough to witness that morning seemed like the birth of the cosmos itself.

But I had ground to cover so I unzipped another layer and picked up the pace. Other than the many tracks in the snow, there were no signs of animal life. Oddly, it was even still too cold for the birds to feel like calling and I wondered if their bills chattered like our teeth do when we are really cold.

About the time I heard my first bird, a croaking raven, I could see through the shrubby junipers to where the Rim would be. I was heading south now and in the distance the peninsula of rocks that juts out over the Rim began to take shape. I nearly broke into a trot in my desire to reach the overlook before the sun broached the horizon. I made it, with not a second to spare, after slowing to negotiate the treacherous snow covered boulders that took me to my aerie.

As slow and sweet as syrup, the sun revealed its corona just prior to its actual emergence. I watched it rise as both its size and color expanded and intensified. As cold as the world was, probably still not more than 15 degrees, it was hard to believe that I was witnessing the daily birth of a great ball of fiery gases. But the birds knew and, somewhat suddenly, they made their presence known by calling as they flitted about the rocks, trees and dried brown brush.

The rocks themselves became vibrant as the sun's rays kissed them into life. Their lichen encrusted surfaces soon became a molten orange but it was one of nature's many illusions as the rocks were still nearly as cold as they would have been at the stroke of midnight.

After some time, I reluctantly bid this sacred, secret world of sun, sky, rocks and trees goodbye. You can capture and hold beauty only in your mind's eye. And even there, sadly, it's only for a moment. I turned away from the cornice and began the walk back home.