

The Cycle of the North

Alan Sullivan

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A murmur through the barrens "Come: now the change of year,"
And fur and feather, hair and hide, are very wise to hear.

THE timber fails just beyond the 59th parallel. First the delicate white birch dwindles, then the smooth bark poplar before his rougher brother, then the spruce vanishes, till, beside the river beds that tempestuous waters have cut deep below the plains, there is only a fringe of tamarack and willow and dwarf pine.

Spring moves at first gently across these solitudes. There is a strange period in April, when the stark rigour of winter is alleviated by soft hollows in the north winds. There are pauses and cessations, intermittent and slowly more constant, and then the winds swing suddenly from east and south. Instantly there is a divine change. On sunward slopes the snow is sucked up into these gentle airs, and May floats up from warmer latitudes across leagues of wild heather and caribou moss.

Then the sturdy growths spring into life. The anemone spreads in great stunted patches of lilac bloom. The snow forget-me-not thrusts through the shreds of winter's disappearing blanket, white as that winter itself, and wild croci flaunt yellow blossoms streaked with fiery red. On low land the tulip is star scattered in deep moss, red also like fire, and the dwarf saskatoons prepare for their profusion of hardy pears.

But ere the blossoms come the population of the barren lands grows with the lengthening days. First the eagles in royal austerity, beating north to breed on the islands of the Arctic. Then dancing clouds of grey-white snow-birds, vociferous rooks and swift wedges of great Canada geese, flanked with drifting flocks of ducks. All these are hardy birds, equipped for the broken weather that yet must come. In the weeks that follow there is a quick procession, a general immigration of smaller geese and ducks, of cranes, wood-peckers and plover, and last of all the swans, incredibly high and marvellously swift, whipping the air with huge wings, whose tip feathers are worn and broken in the long passage from Florida and the Carribean, and the remoteness of South America.

On land there is movement and life. Vast herds of caribou does ripple steadily north to bear their young, secure because nature has robbed their hooves of scent, and the grey wolves, the enemies of their race, cannot thereby track them. Along the steep shores of Hudson's Bay, the she-bear issues lean and ravenous, with the young she has borne and nourished behind, a snow bank, while she fasted the winter long. The salt shores are fringed with her hungry sisters, with tall coast wolves, and white and red foxes, all seeking the dead things from the sea. Musk oxen leave the fringe of timber and graze suspiciously, snuffing flies and mosquitos and wasps into their red throats, of which many shall sicken and die.

Now come July and August when the earth is bright with roses and fruit. The yellow moon-berry swells from the centre of its four-leaved white flower. The eyeberry runs riot, Crow-berries shine like black pearls amid their star-shaped foliage. The blueberry is everywhere, with low, flat bushes and clusters of oval sweetness. The cranberry climbs on the rocks and sands. The snakeberry nods in single perfection, poisonous on its slender stem, and kinikinic, the weed-berry, waits till some wandering redman shall pluck and dry it for the redman's tobacco.

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The plains are carpeted with the profuse blossom of the wild tea, whose velvety-pointed leaf brings comfort by many a camp fire. Next the soil, the coarse, green moss thrusts out its plum-coloured bloom or spreads viewless beneath grey tufts that live upon its surface. On the rocks, splintered by the ice, black lichens stick, thick and cuplike, ere they whiten and die.

And all this time the days are getting longer and the air milder, and the stiff earth turns to slacken her rigid joints and yield the wonderful life that lives but for weeks. Now, too, may be seen the operations of those vital laws and customs that rule the wild. The bulls of the musk oxen patrol their herds in a shaggy and truculent circle, outside of which their outlaws, outlaws by age or ill temper, are pulled down by their ancient enemies. Across the flat country a swan's nest marks bay and point. Here the mother bird hatches her young, while the husband hies to the congregation of males, meeting daily where the food is good. The conclave is that of a club, severely masculine, and the lords of many nests commune noisily together. To the club also, may come the mother, should her mate be killed, to choose another spouse; but only for this intimate and selective purpose is her approach permitted. Coastwise, range packs of white foxes, defenceless singly, but invincible together, and the grey wolves hunt the polar bear, surrounding him with a ring of snapping jaws, when the salt mud sinks under his feet at low tide.

Then, as the year fattens, comes the physical change, and fur and feather, worn, matted and broken, are put away for the new covering that grows before the autumn closes. The swans cluster in solitary places to moult, places where there are periwinkles and clams and crabs and berries for the taking. The caribou move slowly with patches of new hair spreading on their multi-coloured flanks. Everywhere there is an easing and slackening of the eternal war. Carcajou, the wolverine, is too lazy to steal, and eats dead fish, and the white bears drowse in the languid heat.

In September there is a quickening of wild blood. From lonely places the fat moulting birds begin to waddle toward the coast. There is a touch of frost at night, and all plants and fruits fling themselves out with ultimate and prodigal profusion. In the north the caribou does turn with their young and begin to trot south with the sound of a multitude of clicking hoofs and horns, for they do not shed their antlers like the bucks. Then also small tribes that neither hibernate nor eat moss, the rats and beaver and squirrels, replenish their stores.

Gradually the salt water edges become peopled with travellers preparing for that most wonderful journey in the world. Mallard, widgeon, teal, plover, geese, swans, all the broad and narrow billed brotherhood assembles. Night and day the tumult of them ascends. There is eating of sand for digestion, and digging of shellfish to harden muscles softened by the sweet things of the plains, for it is common knowledge that there will be no more sea food till they sight the swamps of the Gulf of Mexico. The air is black with trial flights of young birds trying the strength of young pinions, coming back to earth with calls and whistles and quacking and trumpeting. Old birds, strong of wing and weatherwise, mount to invisible spaces looking for that whisper of the north they all await, till as the autumn days of Indian summer pass, the colonies grow strong and clean and confident.

And then, of a sudden, there is stillness in the air and a grey sky, and with a few white flakes the word of the mysterious north has come. A crisping of the shallow pools and the ducks climb circling into a slender wedge, with the wisest and strongest at the point of it. In two hours the shores are desolate of ducks, for they have far to travel and must start betimes. And so the marvellous procession marshalls its appointed order with the wisdom that lies behind the flat skulls and beady eyes of winged things. As they come they go. The weaker ones first who must stay and rest often by the way and brave innumerable dangers in their short journeys, till only are left the swans, whose single flight can be a thousand miles, who seek the high altitudes where the air is thin. Then, when the swans have gone, the royal eagles throb down from the Arctic in lonely passage along deserted leagues, and when the eagles have sped there is silence on the coasts.

Little by little the ice forms. Lakes narrow. Headland joins to headland. The male white bears follow out, fishing for seals and walrus. Wood buffalo and musk oxen seek shelter in the land of little sticks, and only the coast caribou and bigger wolves brave the open. The barren ground bear hides himself in warmth and sleep and

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carcajou finds a deserted foxhole.

Then comes the snow, light, impalpable and fine like star dust, and behind it the first breathing of that north wind that searches the plain for months. The land tightens, shrinks and hardens. Its rugged ridges are smoothed out in soft curves that swim into each other. Day is obliterated in the half light of a sun that seems a stranger in these regions of death, till with relentless force and swiftness rises the steady drone of the wind. Winter has come to the barren lands.