

On Summer World
An Amazon Exclusive Essay by Bernd Heinrich

Summer, as I experience it, is not just one time. In terms of living, it is a time of courting, birthing, foraging and feeding, avoiding being eaten, growing, and lastly preparing for winter. Furthermore, unlike in winter or life under severe desert conditions, nothing is static. Most of us live in a world where timing is everything. Here in Vermont and Maine where I live, there is about a week to prepare the soil, another to plant the peas, another to put in the tomato plants. There is a week where the bees pollinate the apple trees and a week for us to harvest the fruit, and another to dig the potatoes. All nature is on a tight schedule. The wood frogs mate in mid-April, the robins return late April, the blueberries bloom in May, and the geese migrate north the second week in October. Summer as we know it is not a uniform struggle against excessive heat and lack of water. It is instead a continually shifting schedule of living where the lives of one species adjust to those of others.

So, as I set out to write *Summer World*, my focus changed. One potential approach was to discuss various topics such as mating, nesting, feeding and predator avoidance. Instead, it seemed possibly more engaging to concentrate on conspicuous aspects of the lives of common, every-day animals and plants that we tend to take for granted but that are marvelous because of their hidden agendas and concealed complexities.

It seems to me that we are in a perpetual crisis mode where attention is rightly focused on what is wrong with the world, although too little appreciation is given to what is right with it. Nature is always right. It always bats last; it is the final arbiter of all things that concern every living thing. So I focused on the first thing I saw that captured my attention: mating wood frogs. This species breeds in large crowds that gather for a one- to several-day orgy in almost every temporary little pool, of which there are more than a dozen within my neighborhood. It was a joy to watch the frogs' antics, and I tried to trick them to find out what they respond to, and to then contemplate and figure out their various stratagems. The frogs were strange, comical and counter-intuitive. The noisy males were not only competing fiercely to catch any female they could but also unknowingly, I presume, cooperating in attracting them. Nothing that they did was obvious to me without first delving into their detailed life histories.

The frogs' antics were for awhile by far the best entertainment in town, although the mating dances of a crowd of long-legged flies in my outhouse shed in Maine may have vied for that distinction. These flies, unless one looked closely, were easy to miss.

These and many other wonders directly under my nose seemed endlessly entertaining, and possibly instructive. I felt joy to be alive and in touch with the often secret spectacles of wasps that made clay pots that they stuffed with live drugged spiders, woodpeckers that inadvertently provided at that season the only food around for hummingbirds, and supplemented that of hornets, butterflies and squirrels. I was stunned by caterpillars that had devised ways to fool predatory birds and ants to either ignore them or even to take

care of them. They used disguises that no rational human being could possibly invent in their wildest, most imaginative moments. They can only be seen to be believed.

I also delved into hornets that had it in for me, but whose entertainment was worth every sting that I got—and I got plenty.

Perhaps not surprisingly I came to realize from my observations that many of the fundamental problems animals face in the summer are the same ones that humans face. The most significant problem that is threatening the whole Nature of our planet is that we live beyond our ecological carrying capacity, outside the orbit of close contact with Nature. The ecosystems of plants and animals have draconian measures that solve these problems. These natural measures are not those we could or would want to apply to ourselves, but they can and must be addressed.

Although the focus of this book is simply on enjoying the world of summer, I did not shy from considering our predicament. We have in the past mastered living in the extreme summer of desert environments, as well as surviving in extreme winter. There is no doubt that the human race will long continue to do so. The only question is if it will be possible with all of our numbers now, or require an eventual hundred—or maybe a thousand-fold—decrease of the present levels of consumption and pollution, without destroying the wonders of creation that make the summer world worth living.

Our past was natural and right and perhaps inevitable. Like the seasons that come and go, there is a time when one thing is right, which is followed by a time when something else is necessary. We cannot be wise unless we heed the seasons of the long—as well as the short—cycles of Life.