

Nueltin Wildlife by Amy L. Peterson

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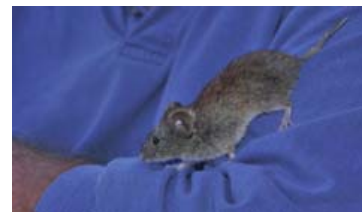
My husband, Mark and I are both biologists, and when we headed to Nueltin Lake at the end of July 2008, we wanted to see wildlife almost as much as we wanted to catch fish. Our packing list included the requisite fishing rods, reels and too many lures, along with a good camera, binoculars, a zooplankton net, small mammal live traps, peanut butter and pistachios.

Bob Gass and Jamie Hoskins--camp hosts for Windy Mini Lodge in 2008—were immediately helpful by sharing that they'd seen "these gray fuzzy things" running around outside the lodge all season. So, before we even got our rods and reels set up, I took my three small, foldable live traps, put some peanut butter inside and set the traps next to the lodge. We spent the day wrestling large lake trout, and when we returned in the evening I found the traps untouched. I gave the peanut butter a go overnight, only to be disappointed again in the morning. I nixed the peanut butter, threw in a couple of pistachios, and within hours I had my first "gray fuzzy."

We determined that the gray fuzzy in question was a northern red-backed vole. It ambled out onto Mark's hand, blinked and sat there for a few seconds before wandering up Mark's sleeve. Jamie came out from the cabin, razzed us for "photographing little fuzzies when most people photograph their large fish", then asked more about them. Red-backed voles are commonly found in the tundra, and, when not munching my pistachios, eat berries, plant material, fungi, and lichens, which they store to get them through the long winter. Red-backed voles can have up to five litters of four to nine babies a year but only live, on average, two years. They are prey for wolves, foxes, and truly biologically bent folks like Farley Mowat, who wrote about eating them in *Never Cry Wolf*. Luckily, Bob and Jamie kept us well fed and we let all our voles go.



I checked and moved my live traps after each day's fishing, and then spent a half hour or so trying to photograph birds that flitted about the shrubbery around the Lodge. This proved an interesting sport for the first day, because it was nearly impossible to focus a camera lens through a bug net. On the second day, I sat facing the wind without my bug net,



only to find it hard to focus mentally when bugs went "thunk" against the raised hood of my Buzz-Off sweatshirt. The last few days were cooler, making photography much more enjoyable and allowing me to photograph pine siskin, common redpoll, white-crowned sparrows, and a buff-breasted sandpiper, all within a stone's throw of the lodge. While fishing, we saw loons, oldsquaw (or long-tailed duck), and bald eagles. While hiking around one evening, I scared up a ptarmigan. And it scared me.

Even during breaks from fishing we looked for animals and birds. We pulled out into one sandy shoreline to find picture-perfect tracks of caribou, with a perfect wolf print right behind. Throughout the week, we found scat from caribou, wolf, fox, moose, bear and ptarmigan. On our last evening, we saw an arctic wolf near Treeline Lodge.

The insects other than the biting kind were also intriguing. The multi-colored bumble bees around the mini lodge were black and yellow, with a beautiful swatch of orange on their abdomen. We saw a large gray insect being carried off by a sparrow, and a hatch of a smaller, dun-colored mayflies flitting about outside the lodge. The black woolly bear caterpillar I found wandering across the floor of the Windy Mini Lodge was a new one for us, and we made sure he found a good spot to safely over-winter. We learned later that there are only a few weeks over the summer when it's warm enough for this little caterpillar to forage. It spends most of its life hibernating, and can spend up to 13 years in the caterpillar stage before pupating and ultimately emerging as a butterfly.



Our "wildlife" interests also extend into the under-water world and include phytoplankton and zooplankton, which are on the bottom of the food chain and keep the trout and pike in Nueltin Lake happy. We collected several samples, and Mark's quick analysis is that both the zooplankton and phytoplankton at Nueltin Lake are amazingly similar to the zooplankton and phytoplankton Mark is currently studying at a Michigan bog.

Mark and I plan to return to Nueltin Lake in 2009, and we'll bring with us everything we took in 2008, plus a dissolved oxygen meter and a few more live traps. Look for us. I'll be the one with the pistachios.