



Nature in Como Park

BY DEB ROBINSON

Even Como Park needs a few friends

June 2007

The early rites of spring were slow in coming to Como.

The April rains fell, the grass greened up, leaves tentatively started to unfurl, and then snow flurries returned. Spring has been painfully slow in coming to our rescue this year. The ice finally released its hold on Como Lake. Most of the water was open as a stopover site for migrating ducks, grebes, and loons by April 17.

During a late-afternoon walk around the lake on that day, I saw over a dozen woodducks (most of them perched in a shoreline cottonwood tree). Out in the middle of the lake were ten lesser scaups bobbing in the choppy water. In shallower water were three species of grebes diving for snails. Buffleheads and ruddy ducks idled in the Como Golf Course ponds. A pair of blue winged teals, marathon-distance flyers, sat loafing on the last remnant of lake ice.

I counted 16 common loons, some fishing and others displaying to one another, on Como Lake that evening. For several days the yodels and tremolos of the loons, haunting calls usually associated with the wilderness, were heard in the heart of the city. The loons only visit the city lakes briefly to rest while they wait for the ice to melt further north.

By mid April, wetlands in the Roseville Reservoir Woods and in vernal pools along the Gateway Trail resounded with the frog songs of spring peepers, Western chorus frogs, and wood frogs. The first migrating green darner dragonflies were cruising along the bike trail. Mourning cloak butterflies, recently emerged from their winter hiding places, fluttered around backyards and woodlands in search of a sweet sip of maple tree sap. Songs, migrating birds, early emerging insects were in the air.

But seldom seen are the furry nocturnal aerialists (and I'm not referring to the bats). Back in early April, Annie and Jo, from the west side of Como Lake, emailed me a few photographs of a wild animal that they couldn't identify. "Deb, this critter was at our birdfeeder 10 pm or so at night. We couldn't figure out what it was. At first we thought it was a baby possum, but the tail was very furry, not like a possum's tail.



Do you have any ideas?" asked Jo. From the photo, I could see the critter in question was about the size of a mouse. It had enormous black eyes, small rounded ears, and a stubby nose. Its coat was grayish brown above and buffy white on its belly. The tail was indeed long and furry, but the tail was flat not bushy. It was a Southern flying squirrel (*Glaucomys volans*). I've never seen a flying squirrel in the city, but when my husband lived in the Ramsey Hill neighborhood he watched a flying squirrel one evening from his second story porch. As he told it, the lively little squirrel scampered high up into a boulevard tree, turned its head back and forth as if judging the distance to the next tree, tensed up and launched itself into space.

On each wrist of the flying squirrel's two front paws is a projection of cartilage that helps deploy wing-like membranes (patagium) between the front feet and the back feet. Right before the in-flight squirrel reached the trunk of the target tree, the squirrel pulled up into a stall, jerked its flat tail upward, and landed heads-up and running. The stubby snout helps the squirrel avoid bruising its nose upon landing.

Flying squirrels do not really fly, but they can volplane for over a 100 feet in one leap. However, most glides tend to be around 20 feet. Flying squirrels can control their flight path, which helps them avoid predators, branches, or playful littermates. And they can even spiral straight down. Flying squirrels eat and store nuts just like other tree squirrels, but they also consume birdseed, insects, bird eggs, fruits, tree flowers, mushrooms, and even carrion on occasion. They sleep and raise their young in tree cavities; however, an abandoned birdhouse will do in a pinch.

Thank you, Annie and Jo, for sharing your urban wildlife sighting. I May never see a flying squirrel, but from now on I'll be scanning the treetops with high hopes of making my own nighttime sighting of *Glaucomys volans*.

Endnotes:

- Como Lake Shoreline Maintenance event on May 13, 6-8pm; volunteers meet at Como Lakeside Pavilion kiosk.
- June 14 Como Park Tree Trek with biologist, Chet Mirocha, meets at 10am at the Como Lakeside Pavilion by the wooden black bear; trek is free.
- District 10 Rainbarrel Workshops on June 14 at 12:30 and 3pm - for more details on all of the above events, go to the District 10 website: www.comopark.org
- To contact this writer: dmrobinson@bitstream.net Illustration by Deb Robinson