Animals Need a Warm Place in Winter, Too

By Susan Camp

It was snowing when I went to bed Friday night, and I was thrilled on Saturday morning by the glorious expanse of glistening white that the day before had been a garden of dried stalks and bare twigs. Granted, we only got three inches of snow, but I am like a 9-year-old about any amount of snowfall.

I started taking pictures from my back deck while I drank my first cup of coffee. After breakfast, I bundled up and started my trek around the yard and field. As I walked through the field, I noticed rows of deer tracks crisscrossing each other. I wasn't surprised; we have a herd of about seven deer that spend much of their time in our neighborhood.

What did surprise me was that I didn't see any other tracks, and I began thinking about the other mammals that live in the field and the woods. Where do they spend the frigid winter days and nights?

The National Park Service website and other sites told me that many animals brave the cold months in one of three ways. Some, including numerous bird species, migrate each year to warmer destinations, while some hooved mammals, like caribou, migrate to areas with less snow in order to stay warm and find grass to eat. We don't have caribou in Virginia, so what do our animals do to stay warm and fed during the cold months?

Many mammals go into a state of dormancy when the temperature begins to drop in late fall. Dormancy includes a sleepy state called torpor and true hibernation or winter sleep. In hibernation, an animal's heart rate and metabolism slow drastically, and body temperature drops. Bears are generally considered to enter hibernation in winter, but it is known that bears sometimes wake up to eat, and body temperature may remain near normal, so there is a question as to whether bears truly hibernate.

Bears don't live in Gloucester, but groundhogs do, and groundhogs, like bears, take a long winter nap. The daily work of groundhogs is to eat enough throughout the rest of the year and sleep through the winter months from October or November to February or later. They remain snug in their underground burrows until they emerge in the spring to begin raiding your vegetable gardens.

The third method of survival is adaptation to winter weather. Most of the mammals on the Middle Peninsula adapt to the cold temperatures, rain, and snow in one or more ways. Most, including deer, raccoons, squirrels, foxes, rabbits, skunks, and rodents grow heavy winter coats. Like groundhogs, they increase their food intake in late summer and fall to put on a thick layer of fat and find warm nests, dens, or burrows for winter housing.

Gray squirrels will move from summer nests, called dreys, high up in trees, to snug dens in tree cavities, often old woodpecker nests lined with moss and leaves. Raccoons prefer hollow oak trees or abandoned dens or burrows to shelter from the cold. Raccoons, skunks, opossums, and rabbits may take up residence in a barn, shed, or crawlspace under a house or porch. To stay warm, groups may huddle together in a nest. Fox families gather in their dens and are known to cover their bodies with their bushy tails. Rabbits and small rodents burrow underground or seek shelter in leaf, brush, or mulch piles. Many small mammals stockpile food in their nests.

All of these animals will venture from their nests on pleasant days, and raccoons may migrate short distances to find food. When greenery is scarce, rabbits and voles may strip tender bark from young trees, a good reason to keep mulch a few inches away from tree trunks. Deer huddle together under overhanging pine trees to conserve energy and forage in harvested corn and soybean fields.

Through adaptation, many animals will survive the harsh winter to produce new litters in spring.