



Left: A green emerald dragonfly. Below: A red fox nurses her trio of kits. Right top: An American bittern. Right bottom: Beaver's breath rises from a lodge in dead of winter. These photos and the stories behind them are posted on the blog "Naturally Curious."

WILDLIFE PHOTOS BY MARY HOLLAND

Outdoors blogging: It's second nature

By MARY HOLLAND
 When I completed my book "Naturally Curious" in 2010, my sense of relief was short-lived.

My publisher explained that I needed a blog to spread the word about my publication. Being a technophobe, I began my "Naturally Curious" blog with some trepidation. Fortunately, I was helped by my editor, Rebecca Didier from Trafalgar Square Books.

My intention was to post an occasional tidbit of natural-history information. I saw this as a temporary project and had no idea that more than three years later, this blog would be the focus of my life. Nor did I appreciate how much work would be required to keep it going.

These days, it is my excuse for spending half of every day outside, and a way to keep educating myself about what can be found outdoors throughout the year.

At first, I did not understand the blog's potential value as a teaching tool. But having been an environmental educator for my entire adult life, I was open to the idea of sharing my passion. I wanted to present information that was visually inviting, with a few explanatory sentences. I kept the entries minimal — long enough to contain some interesting natural history and short enough so I wouldn't lose the reader.

Writing blogs is not for those who dislike deadlines — at least not a five-days-a-week blog such as "Naturally Curious." A typical day consists of rising and posting the previous day's photograph and short essay. Then it's on to the next topic because another post is due in 24 hours.

Discoveries must be made, no matter the weather. Whether it's sunny, raining, snowing or sleeting, I head out with Emma, my Labrador retriever. We explore the woods, fields and ponds to see what is blooming, buzzing or browsing.

Anything is fair game — plant or animal, dead or alive, big or little. Some subjects are as small as the tiny red mites you find on a grasshopper or as big as a boreal bog. I have no firm goal in mind, simply whatever catches my fancy and can be photographed.

Some days I come home without a single photograph. On other days I may have captured hundreds of images. But I always return feeling intimately familiar with what is going on in a variety of habitats on any given day — and one of them is bound to make a great subject.

The passages I write are aimed at the layman but hopefully contain natural history information that is new to most readers, regardless of their outdoor experience.



Naturalist and author Mary Holland takes to the water with her Labrador retriever Emma during one of her outdoor expeditions for her blog "Naturally Curious."

PHOTO BY KAY SHUMWAY

Identification of plants and animals is not the purpose, although I usually do that. My main goal is to give information that inspires readers to head outside themselves.

A typical week might include topics as varied as the appendages that grow on a ruffed grouse's toes, the scat of a fisher, white-pine cone development, stonies mating and a hibernating spotted salamander that had been dug up and discarded by a red fox because of its toxic skin secretions.

I hope to offer something of interest for everyone, every week. Generally, I have more posts about insects in the summer and more animal signs — tracks, scat, trails — in winter. But I always try to include a variety of plants and animals in any given week.

People often ask how I find things to write about. I simply spend several hours a day outdoors, receptive to everything. Because Emma comes along, I probably see less than half of

what's out there. But she earns her keep by finding scat and owl pellets.

I also depend on recommendations from other sources. Late one night, a friend called. He was wondering if a human baby was screaming in his woods. This visit, in my pajamas, generated a blog post on porcupines fighting. One of them had fallen out of the canopy about 10 feet from me in the black of night with quills from its adversary stuck in its nose.

Other tips have resulted in posts on all kinds of topics: wood turtles laying eggs, emerging baby American toads, a ruffed grouse nest, a beaver family, fresh bobcat tracks, a den of foxes, a cecropia moth larva. I am very grateful to anyone who takes the time to call me when they see something they think might pique my interest.

I should also add that I get a fair number of calls which are a bit disappointing. A 20-minute drive might reveal that the "bluebird" was actually a blue jay or the moose that has been present for two weeks left two minutes before I arrived.

I explore by foot, car and boat. The equipment required is not extraordinary — camera, tripod, binoculars, snowshoes and a canoe. I've lost innumerable items during moments of intense photographing, such as lens caps and mittens and hats. And I've lost more than one camera and lens to Vermont and New Hampshire ponds. These are the hazards of the road.

My Labrador and I have shared many experiences in our attempts to secure good photographs, some a bit harrowing. People say I must be fearless and enormously patient. Neither is true. But I have crawled into an abandoned beaver lodge, watched a black bear nap 20 feet above my head, and climbed about 30 feet up a hemlock to photograph a porcupine — only to watch it fall out of the adjacent tree, with me following it shortly thereafter to the ground.

The time I spend outside searching for blog material has greatly increased my chances for seeing unusual activities. I have watched a Cooper's hawk successfully snatch a pileated woodpecker out of the sky, photographed a frustrated eastern newt trying to entice a spring peeper to mate with it, and listened to the increasingly rare call of a whip-poor-will.

Yet I am just as captivated watching a firefly signaling to a potential mate or observing a spring peeper's throat pouch inflate when it calls. Sometimes, the more common sights and sounds are the most inspirational of all.

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A sampling of 'Naturally Curious'

4/19/2012 — Red fox kits still nursing

When red fox kits are roughly five weeks old, not only do they begin spending time outside of their den, but they also start eating solid food and weaning begins. This mother is still nursing her young, but soon she will start discouraging them by not always giving them access to her milk through tactics such as lying on her stomach when they approach her for a meal. Within three weeks the kits will be completely weaned.

6/7/2013 — Male American bitterns calling

American bitterns typically nest in tall, standing cattails and rushes and sedges, where they are well concealed. Like most birds, male bitterns use their voice to attract a female and stake out their territory. Dense marshes present a challenge when it comes to being heard, however. American bitterns overcome this challenge by having a very low-frequency call, which is audible at great

distances in dense marsh vegetation. Once you've heard a bittern's call, you'll never forget it. It is very deep, and has three syllables — "oong-ka-choonk" — preceded by clicks and gulps. The bittern makes this call multiple times by inflating his esophagus while contracting himself quite violently. A female American bittern couldn't help but be impressed.

9/16/2013 — Common green darners migrating

The common green darter, *Anax junius*, is one of our largest dragonflies, measuring three inches long, with a four-inch wingspread. It is strikingly colored, with a green thorax and a bright blue (male) or reddish (female) abdomen. As if that weren't enough to set this dragonfly apart, it is also migratory. Common green darners migrate south from August to November, stopping over (like migrating birds) occasionally along the way, resuming flight after resting and refueling. Thanks to radio telemetry, we now know that

over a two-month migration, common green darners, each weighing about one gram, can migrate over 400 miles.

12/2/2013 — Beaver breath

It's very subtle, but in winter, especially when it is very cold outside, there is a way to tell if a beaver lodge is occupied. The temperature inside the lodge remains relatively stable at around 34 degrees. When snow falls, it provides added insulation, raising the interior temperature of the lodge slightly. A layer of fat and thick fur keep beavers warmer than the air inside the lodge, plus they raise their body temperature even more by sleeping piled on top of one another. All the moist, warm air that beavers give off through breathing and exhalation escapes through the vent in the center of the roof of the lodge. The vent's purpose is the exchange of air; when the warm air inside the lodge rises and hits the cold air outside the lodge, it condenses and forms water vapor that is visible, indicating that there is life inside.