



Skeletons rattle, all about us. But it's not Halloween. It's January. And the skeletons rattling aren't those of scary spooks, but of our deciduous trees, stripped to their dormant, bare-bones state.

Gone are the stately, regal lines of the oaks in full leaf as they stand guard over the woodlot. Gone is the lush fullness of the maples around the house, devoid of their thick canopy giving us shade and coolness. Gone are the green fountain-look of the willows, their slender fronds cascading like waterfalls to the pond at their feet.

Poor things. They all look so vulnerable.

The winter winds toss them about, with no leafed insulation to blunt the biting cold. Freezing rains, common to our borderline location between rain

and ice snow zones, periodically coat every bark-covered surface with a burden of ice that the weaker and more exposed cannot tolerate. They snap off, tumble down to litter the ground below, ultimately becoming kindling fodder for the woodstove.

Still, the silhouette of a tree in wintertime has its own particular haunting beauty. The old sycamores of the neighborhood are especially gracious trees, admired for their beauty, symmetry and interesting bark of contrasting shades. One venerable sycamore that guards the edge of the little stream in the meadow below the farm is a special favorite. A strikingly lovely tree anytime, it becomes a regal queen when dressed in the glittering sparkle of new snow coating each bare limb.

And, stripped of their sum-

mer fullness, the trees give up secrets hidden for many months.

About forty feet above the edge of the yard, one of our maples dropped its leave to reveal a large, conical-shaped object of papery-gray. The hornets that designed the nest should be long gone by now; it would be a prize for display. Hornets may be nasty but they're smart, constructing their self-contained colony right out on the slender, fragile twigs at the very end of a wide-sweeping old limb.

My joking suggestion to The Farmer that he could climb up and retrieve it for me in some spare moment is met with laughter. He is not a tree climber, I'm the one who spent half my childhood hanging out in tree branches.

So, unless we get our hands on some utility company's boom truck, the hornets' home is safe, except from the relentless wind and weather. Those natural forces will ultimately be the giant nest's undoing, either dumping it down all at once or—more likely—shredding it with persistence into bits and pieces.

A host of other nests dot the bare limbs jutting up around the landscape. Several neatly-woven homes of twigs and grasses among the maples hint of the robins and finches which raised

their families under the leafy cover. A few more called the pussy willow home. Smaller nests peek from hedges, brushy fencerows and clumps of bushes along the stream: Giant-sized clumps of leaves scattered through the high reaches of the oaks hint at the abundance of squirrels around the neighborhood, still enjoying their treetop hideaways.

Now, at least one opportunist thrives amidst the bare-branched state of the trees. Our resident sharp-shinned hawk has become amazingly bold about patrolling for his prey—other birds—around the farmstead. The trees' bare condition enhances his predator abilities, enable the "sharpie" to zoom through the branches in pursuit of them. The tops of the bare maples also seem to offer a

handy launch pad for terrorizing this year's especially abundant blackbirds and grackles. Perhaps that is why the hawk has become so aggressive.

Whatever the reason for this fierce predator's claiming dibs on the area, it's had an interesting side effect. Out always-busy bird feeder is nearly abandoned most of the time. And sunflower seed consumption has dramatically dropped. Leaving almost unlimited picking for our fat squirrels.

Who, come to think of it, may have invited the hawk in the first place. Because, while the hawk is busy chasing down other birds, the squirrel just munches seed after seed, growing chubbier by the day.

Leaving us to wonder: if the hawk gets its fill of poultry, will a seed-stuffed squirrel offer an appetite-appealing alternative?



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