



The January fog has rolled in. Within moments, the damp, swirling white cloud has so thickened that one can barely see more than a dozen yards away. Suddenly emerging from the milling mass of moisture comes an apparition, four-legged, black-and-white. The shadowy shape is headed directly for us, coming at a clumsy gallop, with no apparent plans to halt.

At the last moment, as I turn to head off the trotting cow, she

hops up into a stall and begins nibbling feed. A small stampede of herdmates follows, slowing as they near the end of the stalls, peeling off, left and right, each staking claim to a spot.

With all the girls inside, the wide doors at the distant end of the dairy barn are quickly slammed shut, closing off the howling wind and drifting snow. With its source of cold-air fuel cut off, the dense fog inside the warm dairy barn dissipates almost as quickly as it formed.

Even before all the neck chains have been snapped to the stalls, several of the girls are stretched out on the rubber mats bedded with dry sawdust.

Never mind that cattle are actually more comfortable in colder weather than in excessive heat, so long as they have a dry place, out of the wet and the wind. Never mind that they have access to similar, soft dry beds of sawdust in the overflow housing area of the old dairy barn. The "switch" group of cows, usually the younger heifers and cows milking less because they are farther along in their lactations, still come barreling in through the fog when the doors are thrown open for them to take their turn in the enclosed milking barn.

Always on the lookout for creature comfort.

A quick ski tour through the meadow and fields telltale a host of wildlife also out in search of creature comfort. Birdsongs fill the yard, the number of feathered visitors suddenly

swelled with the bitter weather and the easy pickins' at the bird feeders. Blue jays shriek from the pine tree, the titmice titter overhead, two nuthatches parade headfirst down a tree trunk to the feeder and a single, but noisy, crow alights with great flapping and cawing onto a tiptop twig of one old maple tree.

Derrah Dog leads the way, ecstatic at this uncommon, mid-morning jaunt, rejoicing and rolling in the powdery dry snow cover. A creature comfort for her is an adventure walk. So excited she barely knows which way to start, Derrah lopes toward the pond, does an about-face toward the stash of round bales, pausing only briefly to investigate a brush pile. Ahhhh, where to start sniffing first?

Down through the meadow and into the woodlot, an array of wildlife has been calling, leaving tracks so distinctive it's as though each signed a visitor guest book. Meandering trails of dainty paw prints mark the pas-

sage of at least one neighborhood fox, whose habits are easily discernible from the stopping points. The fox trail pokes along the edge of the row of round bales, known habitat of a sizeable mouse population, takes an abrupt turn at the wheel of a wagon parked nearby, then heads up over the hill toward the bunker silo, habitat of still more field mice.

Pointy-toed hoof markings bely a deer emerging from the wood to drink at the stream. Squirrel trails crisscross the path, evidence of numerous bushytails busy being busybodies—as only squirrels can be.

Interspersed with neat, stealthily-left wildlife trails are the broad paw prints being joyously scattered across the landscape by Derrah, bounding about as she tries to sniff and sort out this vast, delicious array of intriguing animal scents. Long, straight scrapes along the erratic paw-print trail, left by her sharp toenails, add a distinctive flourish. Combined with my ragged ski marks, we, too, leave signature prints of our passing.

Headed back to the house through the garden, our path crosses the irregular, hopping marks left by our backyard bunny. And, in the meadow, a redtail hawk sweeps down from the sky and plunges between two rows of big hay bales, another creature seeking a morsel of mouse for its dinnertable.

Back in the kitchen, I spy telltale mouse droppings when I open a drawer, and promptly head for the attic to set out rodent bait.

I know that mice must hide, so as not to be eaten. And, mice need creature comfort, too.

But they can go look for it somewhere besides our house.

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