

More News from the SRA

By Jerry Stage, PhD

Wildlife along the tree lined Scantic River in the SRA is thriving in spite of recent disturbances in the nearby open wetlands under the power lines.

Even the most inattentive hikers cannot miss the beaver works visible along the first 150 meters of the riverside trail. Many trees have been girdled and many are down. The old lodge (abandoned following vandalism by fishermen two years ago) has been repaired, reoccupied, and enlarged. It's about 100 meters below the trailhead but not quite as far as the bridge with the handrail. Two dams are evident: one on the drainage ditch that flows under that bridge and one across the Scantic itself another 50 meters south of the same bridge.

The beaver are most easily observed near dusk though some occasionally appear during the day. Muskrats, river otters and mink are also present and sometimes also appear during the day. While standing next to the lodge one morning last fall I enjoyed a truly memorable show.

Over the course of about an hour I saw 2 beaver, 3-4 muskrats and 2 mink. The most exciting incidents involved the mink. First I was privileged to watch the larger one chase down and attack a swimming muskrat! Since they both disappeared under a swirl of turbulence and bubbles I don't know the outcome but suspect the muskrat didn't fare too well.

Sometime later a smaller mink came bounding along the river bank on the opposite side from me. Then it abruptly dived into the water and disappeared. To my amazement it popped up a few seconds later on my side less than a meter from my toes! Its body was in the water but its front feet were on the bank and its head was turned up towards me with eyes blinking, nose quivering and whiskers twitching. Eventually it surmised I wasn't suitable company and disappeared back into the river.

It was a real thrill to have this delightful close encounter with such a beautiful wild creature! I am grateful the NCLT is able to preserve such places as this where wildlife can thrive and sometimes we are treated to brief glimpses into their lives.

As I write this in mid February the river is mostly frozen, the ground is snow covered and all is quiet save occasional birds calling, wind rushing through bare trees and the boom of shearing ice. Yet the plethora of tracks is mute evidence that the animals are still active. And so are the hikers!

Judging from the abundance of human tracks the beaver colony is enjoyed by many hikers who visit regularly. Indeed, now is a particularly fine time to visit. It's beautiful, tracks are everywhere and mosquitoes are not. Besides, once the river starts its regular spring flooding much of the trail will be under water. The trailhead for the one mile loop route is by the Scantic River Bridge on Durkee Road in Somers.