

JANUARY



January 9

Monroe Bay, Westmoreland County

The sun had the afternoon sky to itself but for a lone swirl of high cloud, pale against a deep blue. The bay rested unruffled, touched with the same blue. Across its broad reaches, near the far shore, a raft of ducks relaxed, most of them sleeping, heads tucked into back feathers. A closer look revealed a gathering of squat little ruddies, tails cocked skyward. Beyond, gulls loitered on wharf pilings. Gulls always seem to have plenty of time to stand around, doing nothing. Half a dozen swans tipped peacefully in the shallows.

A shrill cackling from above shattered the calm. I looked up just as an eagle folded its wings and plummeted earthward. After falling several hundred feet, it threw out its legs and flared up into a path of another eagle. The two tumbled together awkwardly for a moment, then recovered composure as they gained altitude. Tracing slow, lazy circles in the blue, they came together several times, almost brushing wings.

From that height, they could look down on all of Monroe Bay and on their eyrie, an accumulation of sticks and small branches in the highest fork of a white oak. Half of the mass had been dislodged during a recent storm and had fallen into the lower portions of the tree. Repairs will have to be made within the next few weeks, before egg laying begins.

The eagles did not call again, nor show any courtship activity, but that brief bit of interplay marked a turn toward the season of birth and renewal - toward spring. Yet by the calendar it was winter that had just begun.

January 16

Currioman Bay Park, Westmoreland County

It was sullen and overcast much of the day, with a chilly wind, but near dusk fiery streaks showed on the horizon and the sun, just before it set, glowed with an intense red-orange. The sky smoldered briefly with this eerie brilliance, which brushed only the treetops.

At that moment, a spring peeper piped from a marshy roadside ditch. One long note, frail and tentative. A pause, and the tiny frog called again. Could it have been roused by this strange and sudden light? Or did it respond to a slight rise in temperature?

The peeper will certainly fall back into hibernation during the ice, snow, and cold to come. It will be late March or early April before the wetlands ring with their clamorous nuptial rites.

Yet, here in January, sounded the first voice of spring. It spoke of the return of life, of the force and promise that pulses even within the merest bits of life.

January 17

Windmill Point Park, Lancaster County

For two days south winds had generated a strong flow of warm air. With the balmy winds came vaporous mists, silvering the landscape. Moisture had condensed on every surface. Every twig, each blade of grass, even the pine needles glistened with tiny droplets of water. First light was a pallid suffusion on the horizon.

From this murk emanated a serene, melodious murmur, barely audible. The warmth had stirred a troupe of wintering robins to song, their voices breathing an inexpressible sweetness and clarity. Tinged with melancholy, the subdued strains radiated a sense of joy, of well-being.

The singing birds were pausing from primary concern of the season: finding enough to eat. They had flocked to a grove of holly trees, where they hovered and fluttered to reach the bright red berries. Some of them dropped to the ground and scratched in the dried leaves; others bathed in a marshy streamlet.

The singing was not casual or incidental. At intervals, each flew in turn to the topmost branches of an oak, where, relaxed and unhurried, it joined others in this quiet, deliberate caroling. There seemed to be a communion, a comradeship among them. In contrast to this song was the staccato chatter they used to keep in touch and the occasional harsh alarm calls.

These were not new arrivals, migrants returned early from the South; rather, they were wintering robins, keeping to the woodlots, feeding on fruits and berries, and roaming about in flocks. They will come to lawns and backyards when the temperature warms enough for earthworms to emerge.