

Our Winter Wonderland

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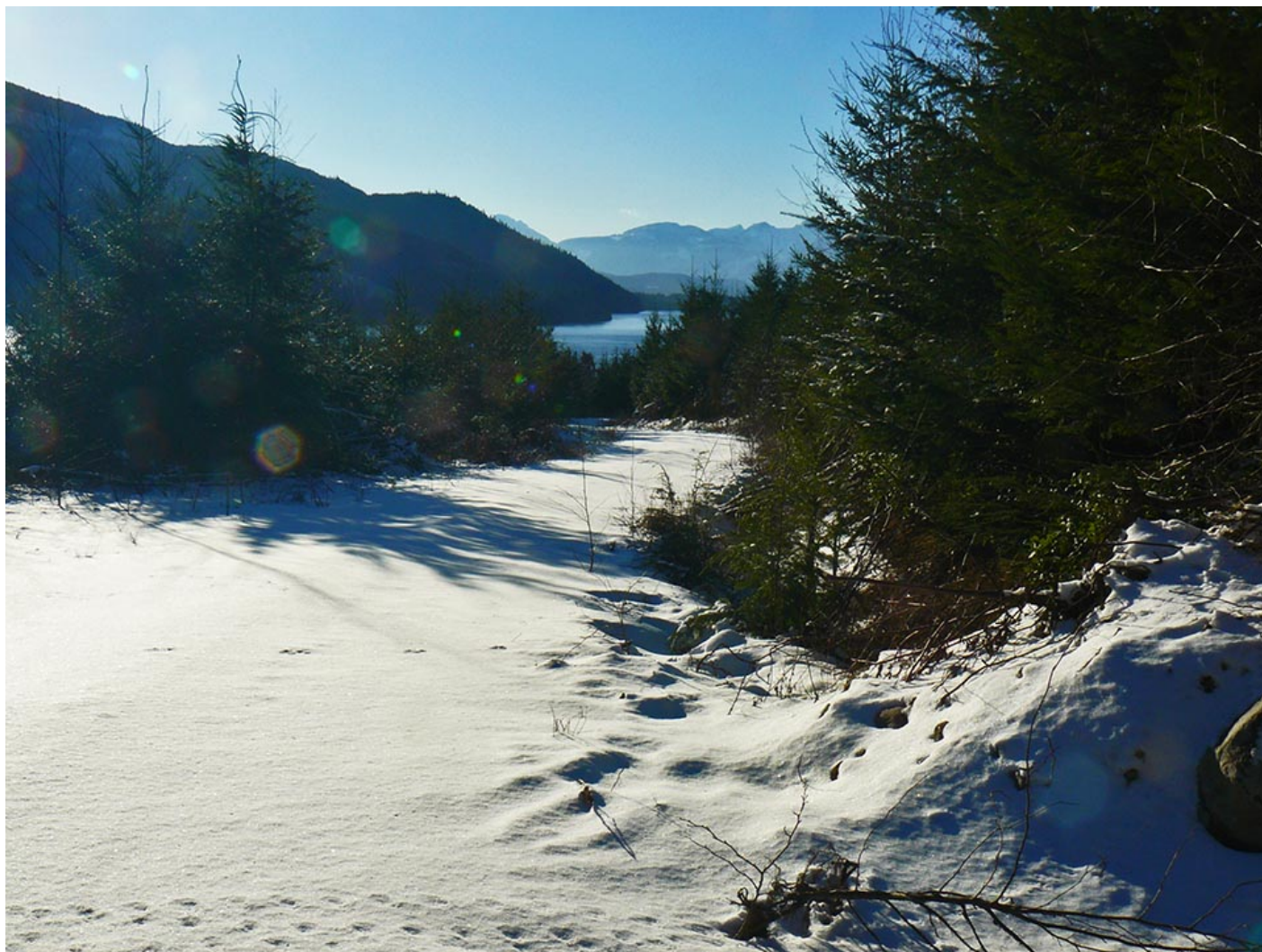


Image: *Looking down Port Neville Inlet towards Robber's Knob.*

It's been a bright, blue-skied day, with the temperature hovering around 0°C, and only a slight breeze (in spite of continued warnings of cold outflow winds) – a perfect day for a walk through our woods. We have a couple inches of snow on the ground from two days ago, not enough to make walking difficult, but it makes a perfect layer in which to observe animal tracks.

Now that the leaves have all fallen, our alder forest has taken on an elegant beauty – clean white

trunks reflecting the bright sunshine, with the red-hued buds adding a bit of color to the forest canopy. There has been lots of animal activity in the last two days, with tracks everywhere. One of the most commonly seen was martin tracks, veering back and forth over the trail as it hunted for rodents. They are beautiful animals, mink-like but with rounded ears and a long busy tail. Although they are supposed to be mostly nocturnal, I've seen them around our place during the daylight as well. A week ago, one tried to move in with us, and was busy digging its way into the insulation in our roof. Ken gave it a good scare, and we seem to have reached an agreement with it that we are not sharing our den. We've also seen tracks from another member of the weasel family, an ermine or short-tailed weasel. These tiny little weasels are excellent mousers and are welcome around the yard to keep the mouse population in check.



Image: *The trail through an alder forest.*

Rodents appear to be abundant, based on the tracks we saw. There were lots of deer mice, voles (probably long-tailed), and Douglas squirrels. Clearly, the martens and ermines were well fed.

We saw black-tailed deer tracks once, and along the forestry road, we followed the trail of a single wolf for over a kilometer. Eventually the wolf lost interest in walking and loping along the road, or else heard something that sounded like a meal, and in a single bound, leapt five feet up the vertical road cut, and without a slip or scrabble, the tracks disappeared into the bushes. They are amazingly powerful animals.

Birds were also plentiful. The cedar trees are shedding their seeds on the snow, and many little birds have flown down to feed on them. Occasionally we saw marks in the snow from wings and

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tails as the birds landed and took off again. Most likely, we were seeing the tracks of juncos, fox sparrows, song sparrows, and winter wrens, all of which we have watched feeding outside our cabin windows. Snowshoe tracks from ruffed grouse criss-crossed our path. Unlike the smaller birds, which hop, ruffed grouse stride and leave single-file tracks. On our way back to the cabin, we flushed a plump, long-beaked bird from the pond that our house creek makes where it flows under the old logging road. Although I was unable to see it clearly, I suspect that it might have been a snipe. These birds are rather solitary, and like to hang out anywhere there is water.

Hiking through our forest reminds me of the great beauty of this place, even in winter, the harshest season of the year. This is why we love it so much out here!