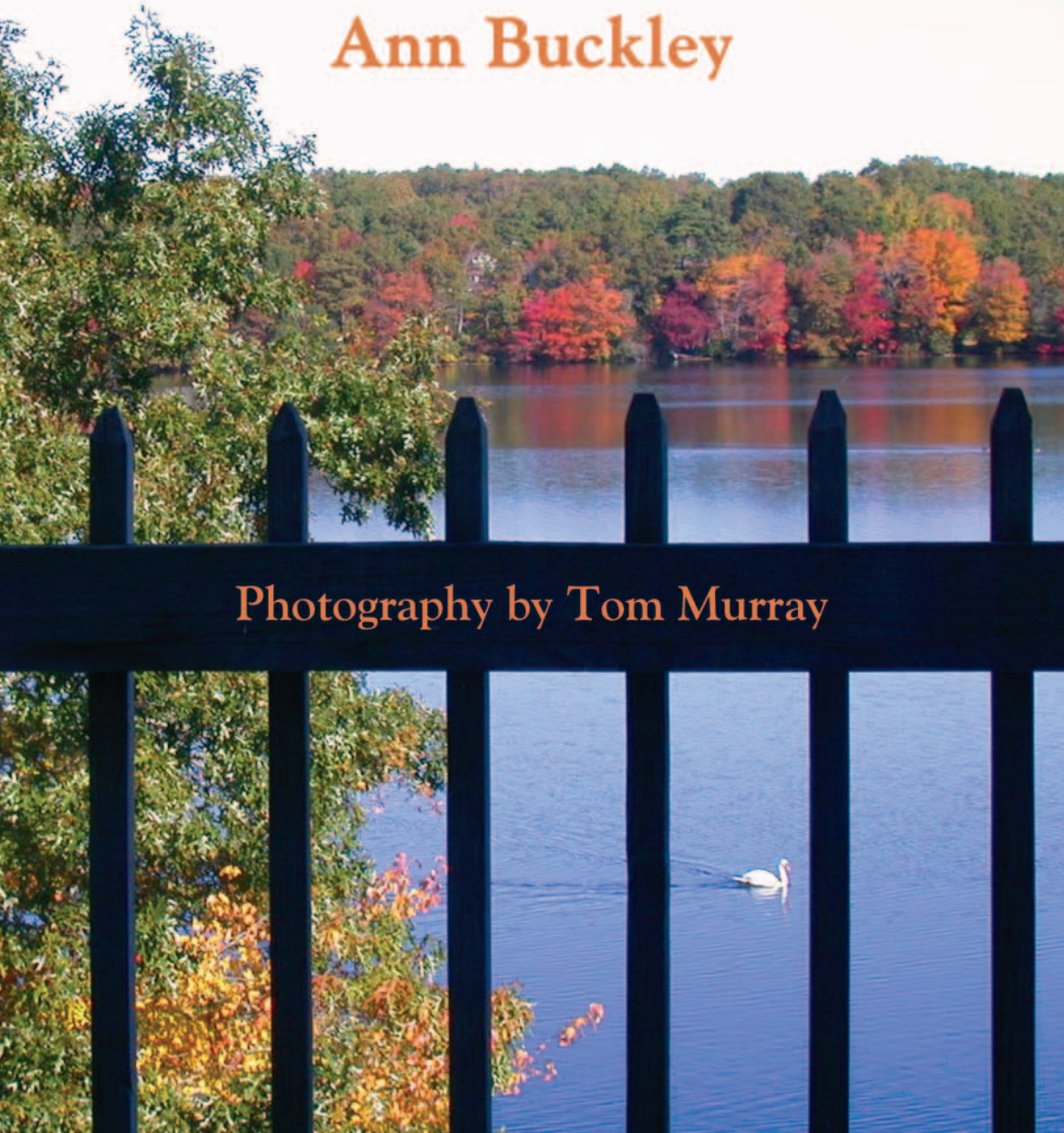
The Natural World *from* A Wooden Deck

Ann Buckley



Photography by Tom Murray

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Text by Ann Buckley

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Eastern Tiger Swallowtail

Short-eared Owl

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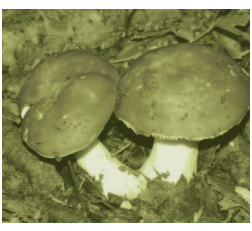

ANN BUCKLEY

Wooden Deck View

The Wooden Deck, on the second story of my building, sits well above Flax Pond and is an ideal place from which to view the pond, the surrounding woodlands, the cranberry bog, and the sky above them. My desk inside the sliding glass door is no more than four feet away from the bird feeders on the Wooden Deck. This proximity gave me the opportunity to watch the activity at close range. I kept my binoculars and digital camera nearby. The images and observations that I recorded set off a chain reaction that compelled me to seek information from my personal library or from the many websites that abound with facts about the natural world.

TOM MURRAY

Black capped Chickadee

The two birds coming most frequently to the feeders turned out to be the black-capped chickadee and the American goldfinch. The chickadee, always announcing its presence, has many calls to convey different signals. Its repertoire includes mating calls, danger signals and calls to reclaim a lost member of the flock. During the breeding season, chickadees excavate cavities in the soft rotting wood of trees, preferably birch trees. They carry away the chips to a nearby perch where they drop them. This pile of chips indicates that the nest is within close proximity. Look around for a cavity in a tree trunk or at the end of a broken branch. Chickadees band together in late summer and fall to form small flocks. Some migrate south while others choose a non-breeding area where they remain until the breeding season begins in the spring.

HENRY GOLET

Hummingbird Moth

Hummingbird moths, daytime fliers only, were frequent visitors to the three butterfly bushes clustered on the deck. The hummingbird moth, also called a clearwing moth, has clear wings without scales as opposed to the flat scaly wings of butterflies and other moths. This large colorful moth and butterflies share a common trait. They feed by means of a proboscis, a long flexible tube-like structure that coils up when not in use. When feeding, the moth hovers by means of fast-beating wings and then extracts nectar from the flower with its proboscis. In this position, the hummingbird moth indeed resembles a hummingbird.

TOM MURRAY

Ant Mimic Spider

Several groups of spiders have evolved to look and behave like various species of ants. Ants are particularly good insects to mimic, firstly because they are very numerous and secondly because many animals find them distasteful or dangerous to eat. Mimicry is a strategy for survival. By resembling and even behaving like unpalatable or dangerous ant species, some spiders in ant's clothing minimize the chance of being eaten by predators. Of course, the casual observer who chances upon these spiders would dismiss them as ants. Several of these ant-mimics are jumping spiders (family Salticidae) belonging to the genus Myrmarachne. A few spiders not only look like ants but smell like them as well. These spiders are such good mimics that they trick not only animals that eat ants but they trick the ants as well. By smelling like the ants, the spider is able to enter the ant nest unchallenged and steal their young.

TOM MURRAY

Eastern Chipmunk

What a pleasure to watch an eastern chipmunk, which is a very cute animal. How many children's books have you read that starred a chipmunk? The chipmunk is a small agile animal that forages during the day. Its coat has a complex pattern that adds to the appeal of this interesting mammal. Chipmunks typically scamper along the ground looking for food. Their diet includes nuts and seeds, insects, earthworms, small birds and rodents, fruits, frogs and snakes. They occasionally climb trees to forage for nuts and acorns. Chipmunks, rather than eating food on site, often store it in their cheek pouches.

Recently I read an account that one particular chipmunk had seventy sunflower seeds and thirty-one corn kernels in its cheek pouches. During the colder months of the winter, chipmunks hibernate lightly in their dens after plugging up the entrances. They emerge from their den in late February to early March. They breed in spring and summer and produce one to eight young.

TOM MURRAY

Banded Argiope

When spiders mate, the eggs are not immediately fertilized by the sperm. The male's sperm, stored in a structure called a spermatophore, remains viable in the female for more than a year. In preparation for laying eggs, most spiders spin silk egg cases. The female initially spins a silken pad on which she deposits both her eggs and stored sperm. She then covers the pad with more silk in order to form an egg sac that may be spherical, a flattened disc or sometimes stalked.

TOM MURRAY

Northern Water Snake

I have heard several reports that northern water snakes swim in Flax Pond. I have not seen a water snake to date but I accept the reports that were handed in by reliable observers. Northern water snakes, the most common snake on Cape Cod, can be four feet long. They have massive bodies that are proportionally much thicker than those of most snakes. If disturbed or threatened in any way, the snake can enlarge its body. It takes in air to inflate the one lung that runs lengthwise in the body. In addition to the enlargement of the body, the snake's head flattens out to give an even more formidable appearance. Northern water snakes prefer quiet waters where they can hunt for frogs, small fish, crayfish, insects and small mammals.

The story line for all the organisms that I have discussed in this journal is the same. The success of each organism depends upon many factors such as successful reproduction, availability of food and the ability to protect itself from both natural enemies and man, who has a way of intruding when and where he is not wanted. ❧

HENRY GOLET

Spicebush Swallowtail Caterpillar

A caterpillar goes through four or five stages before reaching its final growth. The caterpillar in the photograph has completed its growth and soon will form a chrysalis. I have seen this caterpillar only once as it tends to seclude itself in a rolled-up leaf secured by self-produced silk threads. I was fortunate, however, as the caterpillar was out in the open clinging to the underside of a sassafras leaf. The caterpillar has an arresting appearance complimented by huge false eyes complete with simulated pupils. This is another example of a defense mechanism designed to scare off a predator. Admittedly, I was taken aback when I turned over the leaf.