Big River

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Remodeling the River
From Willow Mats to Seed Islands

by David Syring

The Upper Mississippi is full of what engineers call "structures" — wing dams, closing dams, riprap, dredge islands, mooring buoys, channel markers and, more recently, seed islands. They've radically changed the way the river works and looks. Actually, many structures being built today are designed to remedy problems caused by structures built decades ago.

The early 1800s saw the beginning of projects to dredge shallow spots and remove log jams and other obstacles to river boats.

While not, strictly speaking, creating structures, these activities set the stage for the future relationship between people and the river.

The first wing dams — layers of rock and willow mats that protrude from the river's bank — were built on the upper river in the 1840s by private citizens. Beginning in the 1870s, the Army Corps of Engineers began using wing dams and closing dams to concentrate the river's flow, creating a current swift enough to scour the Main Channel deeper for river traffic.

By 1930, the Corps had constructed more than 1,000 wing dams in the first six pools of the Upper Mississippi (roughly from the Twin Cities to Trempealeau, Wisconsin). According to Army Corps historian John Anfinson, a single 9.7-mile section in Pool 5A had 140 wing dams.

Many of the old wing dams still exist, although they disappeared underwater in the 1930s when the lock-and-dam system took over the role of maintaining a channel.

"Generally, if a wing dam is close enough to the surface to be a hazard, you can see where it disturbs the water's surface," explained Jon Hendrickson, a hydraulic engineer with the Corps' St. Paul office. "So you know they're there."

"I've seen a lot of fishermen around them [wing dams]. They look for them, because fish like to be around them," Hendrickson said.

The closing dam was a variation on the wing dam. Built across openings to backwaters, closing dams...

(Remodeling the River continued on page 2)
concentrated the current in the Main Channel. Unfortunately, blocking the flow to backwaters reduced oxygen levels and increased sedimentation in backwaters.

**Riprap**

When wing dams worked, they pushed the river's current toward the opposite shore, sometimes causing erosion problems. Thus began the Army Corps' love affair with another, now ubiquitous, structure — riprap. The bank was first graded to an engineered slope, then covered with willow and rock to control soil erosion.

Riprap is still the Corps' first choice for bank protection. If you see a spot covered with rocks the size of your head that look like bleached bones, you're looking at riprap.

"When it's laid, it looks new and artificial, but over time the rock ages and debris such as logs pile up, and it looks better," says Hendrickson.

While it may look more like a natural part of the river as it ages, to turtles and other creatures riprap creates a barrier between the land and the river. Deer cannot cross riprap to get a drink, and turtles have an unfortunate tendency to slip between the rocks, get stuck and die.

"Sometimes adults can negotiate riprap and sometimes they can't," says Bob Hay, cold-blooded species manager for the endangered species bureau of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR). "Turtles nest on upland sites that are clear of vegetation. They also have something we call 'nest-site fidelity,' meaning they return, year after year, to the same nesting site. When riprap gets laid between the water and their nesting sites, turtles will sometimes get trapped in the large rocks, and dry out and die there."

Hay says that nobody has systematically studied the impact of riprap on turtle populations, but occasional field observations suggest it's a problem for adults.

"And you know that if the adults are having problems, hatchlings definitely can't get across," he says.

Hay is not opposed to the use of riprap where it's necessary to stabilize the banks, but he would like to see the spaces between the rocks filled with smaller gravel to create a path to the water. He's recently been pitching this idea to the Army Corps and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Offshore rock piles are an alternative method for stabilizing banks. Instead of laying riprap on the shore, the Corps piles rocks a short distance away. This creates a protective screen that prevents waves from hitting the shoreline.

"They're nice in situations where we can't get access to the shore [to put in riprap]," says the Corps' Hendrickson. "We make an offshore obstacle to erosion, and that way we don't have to dredge to get a rock barge to the shore."

As an added benefit, these structures often create a diverse habitat. Plants begin to grow in the protected area between the pile and the shore and provide food and shelter for fish and waterfowl.

"Refuge managers like them," says Hendrickson.

If you visit the landing under the Interstate 90 bridge, on the Minnesota side of the river, north of La Crescent, you can see some variations on riprap and offshore rock piles. The Corps, under the Environmental Management Program (EMP), recently built several structures there to protect walleye habitat and stabilize island banks. Behind the waterline riprap, rows of willow saplings were planted. The saplings don't look like much right now, but the hope is that as they grow they'll hold soil and help stabilize the banks during high water.

**Locks, Dams, Islands and Restorations**

The 1930s brought the construction of the most extensive structures on the Upper Mississippi River — the locks, dams and their associated dikes. Designed to create a permanent nine-foot channel, these structures have had more impact on the river's environment than all other structures combined. The locks and dams changed the Upper Mississippi from a free-flowing, meandering river into a series of slackwater lakes. As public environmental awareness has increased, the Army Corps has had to try to redress some of the problems caused by the lock-and-dam system.

One of the most serious problems caused by the dams is the erosion of natural islands in the Mississippi. In some places, such as the...
area around Stoddard, Wisconsin, up to 90 percent of the islands eroded due to the higher water levels caused by the dams.

Projects under the EMP have created artificial islands using dredge material and planted "seeds" of riprap in the river. Seed islands are intended to catch sediment as it flows past, to create varied habitat for plants and wildlife.

"The idea is to put a structure in the flow in an area where sand transport occurs," says Hendrickson. "The sand will be trapped downstream of the island, and you also get scour on either end. Where you had a flat, sandy bottom that was two feet deep across an area, now you've created a variety of depths and habitat. You've got an island with shallow areas downstream and some deeper water nearby."

The first attempts to create islands took place at Weaver Bottoms in Pool 5 in 1987. Originally designed as a series of small islands, the plan changed when the Corps joined the project. Dredge material from the high center of the islands sloughs off during high water. The Fish and Wildlife Service, who assumed responsibility for planting the islands, is still working to get willow and grasses growing.

"We learned a lot," says Hendrickson. "We had to go in a number of times to place additional shoreline stabilization."

The Army Corps built a system of islands in Pool 8, between Onalaska, Wisconsin, and Genoa, Wisconsin, to create mixed habitat where islands have eroded. The islands appear to be working, and they seem to be weathering river conditions well.

"After the '93 Flood, for example, we expected some island loss, but we found almost no erosion on the Pool 8 islands," says Hendrickson. "We even found some evidence of deposition."

You can get a look at them by driving south from Brownsville, Minnesota, on Highway 26. A good place to stop for a view is the parking lot of the Shellhorn Roadhouse, about two miles south of town. A second phase of this project will build seven islands and place six seed islands in Stoddard Bay. This phase will cost $2.3 million and is scheduled for completion in fall 1999.

One of the most expensive habitat restoration projects is a system of dikes in the Trempealeau Wildlife Refuge. Costing $5.2 million, the dikes separate areas of the refuge so that water levels can be manipulated to encourage plant growth. When you visit these structures, they look like gravel roads through a marsh, with gated pumping stations in the middle. River managers, however, have high hopes for the planned drawdowns, which have been successfully used on other parts of the river (see Big River, October 1996, November 1996, October 1997 and November 1997).

And More Structures

Gated culverts have been installed in the dikes at Lock and Dams 4, 5, 7 and 8 to allow fresh, oxygenated water to flow into backwaters. The culverts are left open when water flows are sufficient, but they are closed when necessary to maintain the channel.

The Coast Guard maintains a system of buoys and daymarks to mark the channel. While rock piles with signs mounted atop have been used for daymarks in the past, the current preferred model is a reflective sign mounted atop a piling driven into the riverbed.

At a few spots, near Lock and Dams 9 and 10, the Army Corps maintains mooring buoys — hollow metal platforms where towboats can wait to pass through the locks. The buoys keep the towboats, which would otherwise have to tie off on a mainland tree, away from the bank and reduce erosion.

A final structure worth noting closes the circle of modern human activities affecting the river. When people began to remove logs and debris from the channel, back in the early 1800s, they could never have foreseen the day that the Army Corps of Engineers would deliberately "create" a logjam.

To reduce currents that were eroding islands in Billy's Slough, near Harpers Ferry, Iowa, the Corps, in conjunction with the Iowa DNR, took a lesson from the way the river formerly managed itself. They hired a contractor to cable together trees cut for a nearby project, then anchor them in between the islands. Mimicking the river's old ways, the logjam should reduce water volumes through the gap.

It cost $11,000 to get the river to do what it used to do for free.

David Syring is associate editor of Big River. His last story for Big River was "Where's the Money? Managing the EMP" (October 1997).

Both of the photos in this story are from the Environmental Management Technical Center Web site.
history Dubuque was a minor player. He lived in a time and place of relative peace compared to the high drama in the years after his death. The youngest of 15 children, he was born into a prosperous farm family in Quebec. The family was originally from Normandy, where the name was spelled Dubuc. He learned to read and write, though only one in 35 Canadians at the time were literate. Dubuque’s estate lists a library of 58 books.

He came west in the early 1780s to Michilimackinac as a clerk, then joined his brother at Prairie du Chien to trade with the Indians. To Europeans at the time, the Upper Mississippi was a remote frontier, rife with political intrigue. The Mississippi was an international border. Spain claimed the land west of the river, and the United States claimed the east bank. (A secret treaty signed in 1800 returned the land on the west bank to the French, but in 1803 President Thomas Jefferson bought it for the United States.)

The Mines of Spain

On September 22, 1788, Dubuque leased the “Mines of Spain,” which produced the richest and purest lead in the area, from the Mesquakie tribe (also known as the Fox). He probably picked the name to curry favor with the Spanish officials who governed the territory. This mine was to become the focus of his business activities for the rest of his life.

We know from the final inventory of Dubuque’s possessions that, while he lived in a remote place, he attempted to maintain a middle-class lifestyle. He was a frequent visitor to Prairie du Chien, with its 200 inhabitants, and made periodic trips to St. Louis, which had about 1,000, mostly French, inhabitants. Several reports exist of Dubuque playing a lively violin at dress balls in St. Louis and being an animated dancer.

It is not clear how Dubuque became interested in the lead mines. Another Frenchman, Joseph-Baptiste Parent, had worked them before Dubuque took over. Tribes sometimes asked white men they regarded as responsible to manage tribal enterprises. According to Dubuque’s friend Nicolas Boilvin, of Prairie du Chien, the Mesquakie trusted and admired Dubuque because he had been generous to them. The document sealing their business arrangement mentions that the Mesquakie knew Dubuque as “The Little Night.”

One myth claims that Dubuque had a Mesquakie wife — Potosa, the daughter of chief Peosta. According to Jonathan Buffalo, historian for the Mesquakie tribe, there is no evidence to support this. If Dubuque had a Mesquakie family, their names would probably have appeared on the rolls in Keokuk’s tract in Lee County. Many of the “half-breed” children of the other Frenchmen working for Dubuque seemed to have moved there after Dubuque’s death.

Jonathan Buffalo hypothesizes that Judge Thomas Wilson’s claim that it was “the great object of Dubuque’s life to see how many Indian wives he could get,” and Lucius Langworthy’s statement that Dubuque “adopted their habits and customs, married into their tribe, and became a great chief among them” reflects the tendency of the dominant culture to glorify its representatives who have been involved with native peoples, manifestations of The Man Called Horse syndrome. More often than not this was fantasy.

There are references to “Madame Dubuc” in two letters to Dubuque, but when he died there was no mention of a wife or children in any of his papers. Dubuque’s remains were excavated in 1897 and moved to the new limestone monument. Exhumation revealed two other skeletons buried at the same time. One was Chief Peosta’s, and the other was an unidentified woman — Madame Dubuc? Potosa?

Peosta’s skeleton was kept as a museum exhibit until 1973, when pressure was brought to bear to have it, too, reburied next to the monument. No one knows what happened to the other skeleton.

An odd sidelight to the skeleton story is that Dubuque’s skeleton was missing its lower jawbone. Rumor has it that after the grave was vandalized on several occasions, Caroline Dexter, the first teacher in Dubuque, discovered the jawbone and kept it so that it would not be further desecrated.

Politics Takes Its Toll

This area came under the influence of the Spanish, the French, the British and the Americans during Dubuque’s time. He seemed to be adept in dealing with bureaucrats, whatever their nationality. Through
it all, he continued to ship furs north to Michilimackinac and lead south to St. Louis.

After Napoleon sold Louisiana to the United States, Indian leaders were uneasy about the change. Settlers rapidly moved into the area. Among the French already here, there was widespread panic about the security of their holdings. Dubuque, who was in debt, quietly sold half his land to Auguste Choteau in 1804. Had the Mesquakie been aware of this transaction, they would have been distrustful. Lewis and Clark were in the initial stages of their first trek up the Missouri; these were momentous days.

William Henry Harrison, a noted Indian fighter, was governor of the Indiana Territory at this time and temporarily in charge of Upper Louisiana. There had already been several confrontations between the Osage and the Sauk and Mesquakie. Harrison and others proceeded to defuse trouble by sending an Osage delegation to Washington and by convincing a Sauk and Mesquakie group, in St. Louis for other reasons, to cede much of their land to the United States. A provision in the treaty allowed Dubuque to maintain his holdings.

Within a year, however, the Sauk and Mesquakie registered a complaint with the new governor of Upper Louisiana, James Wilkinson, claiming that the group that had signed the treaty had no authority to do so, and that they had no idea what they were signing. Wilkinson told them that there was nothing he could do.

Wilkinson, a shifty character, appointed Zebulon Pike, who proved over the years to be no slouch at shiftiness himself, to chart the Upper Mississippi. Accounts indicate that Dubuque didn’t have much use for Pike, and that Pike’s stays there were brief.

Dubuque had at least 10 Frenchmen working the mines, the fur business and the 1,600 acres he farmed. There seem to have been two main settlements — a small Indian village on the Little Maquoketa River and a mixed-blood enclave on Catfish Creek. Dubuque’s house was somewhere in between.

His Legacy

Failing health and increasing financial problems forced Dubuque to give up a briefly held position as U.S. Indian agent. In 1809, while in St. Louis, he arranged to have Pierre Choteau assume responsibility for the mines upon his death.

He died on March 24, 1810. His grave was marked by a larger version of what one might find at a traditional Mesquakie burial site. It looked like a miniature house with a gabled roof and a window. It was also marked with a tall cedar cross.

Choteau arrived with appraisers a few weeks later and inventoried Dubuque’s belongings. He split the land into 13 strips, which were nine miles long and seven-eighths of a mile wide. The land was sold at two auctions in 1811.

This land transfer began a series of labyrinthine legal maneuvers. By 1846 there were 112 claimants. The case was argued until 1854, when Choteau’s heirs were denied ownership — a fitting conclusion to the disputes, since the Mesquakie probably never sold the land to Dubuque.

Julien Dubuque was a failure as a businessman. Despite his relative insignificance, his legend, like the legions of many other founding fathers in this country, has blurred the distinction between fact and embellishment. And today, a city bearing his name sprawls between the sites of the two original settlements.

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Ken McCullough’s most recent books of poetry are Travelling Light and Sycamore. His last story for Big River was “John Latsch, River Philanthropist” (May 1997). He lives in Winona, Minn.
**Current Events**

By Reggie McLeod and David Syring

**Clamming Banned**

Washboard mussels can rest easier in their beds since the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources banned commercial clamming on the Mississippi. Nobody claims to know exactly why populations are dropping, but increased boat traffic, pollution, rising numbers of natural enemies and commercial harvest of mussels to feed the cultured pearl industry in Japan may all be factors.

Plugs drilled from mussel shells are used to seed oysters that produce cultured pools.

Other states, including Iowa, Minnesota and Illinois, have also banned commercial clamming. The ban will remain in effect until the mussels recover, according to *The Wisconsin State Journal* (12-4-97).

The ban may not stop the taking of mussels. A Brownsville, Minnesota, couple was recently charged with transporting tens of thousands of illegally harvested mussels across state lines. Gregory and Lisa Myers were indicted by a federal grand jury in Des Moines, Iowa, for violating the Lacey Act, a federal law prohibiting taking illegally harvested wildlife across state lines.

Despite long-standing bans on harvesting from inland waters in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa and Illinois, the couple harvested mussels valued at $34,238 and took them to Muscatine, Iowa, to be sold to a dealer. Officials say overharvest throughout the country has led clammers to leave areas of legal harvest to exploit closed clam beds, according to the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* (11-27-97).

**Zebras and Water Clarity**

Reports of increasing zebra mussels and water clarity have filtered into the *Big River* office this fall. River users at the South Side Boat Club in Quincy, Illinois, report they discovered their docks were encrusted with zebras, and that the river’s water was clearer than anyone could remember. Kurt Welke, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Fisheries Manager in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, observes that divers on a native mussel survey could be seen 10 feet below the surface — this in an area where divers often cannot see their own hands in front of their face-mask.

Zebra mussels make the water clearer by filtering the particles from up to a quart of water a day. While this might seem like a good way to clean up the river, the result of such filtering may be that zebras use a great deal of oxygen, and use up food resources that native mussels and fish depend on.

River biologists are concerned that low dissolved oxygen levels found this summer in many areas of the river may indicate the future negative impact of zebras on the river. River biologists are concerned that barge traffic may continue to transport young zebras, called veligers, into uninfested or mildly infested areas.

In an Associated Press story (*St. Paul Pioneer Press*, 12-14-97), an ecologist worries that zebra mussels in Lake Michigan have damaged the food chain.

Mike Quigley, who works for the Great Lakes Environmental Laboratory of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, warns that amphipods, a major source of food for fish, are disappearing from Lake Michigan. The quarter-inch long, shrimp-like creature that used to make up 70 percent of the animal life on the lake floor is a filter feeder that competes with zebra mussels for food. Populations of fish that depend on amphipods for food, such as yellow perch, are also declining.

**Marsh Road Update**

La Crosse, Wisconsin — As expected by protesters, the Wisconsin Department of Transportation has recommended that a new, high-volume road be built across the La Crosse River Marsh to connect the north and south sides of the city (see *Big River*, June 1997). The plan, known as 5B-1, would cost about $84 million and force 56 families out of their homes. Fifteen businesses would have to relocate. Twenty-four acres of wetland would be filled in.

Supporters and opponents have been equally vocal, prompting Mayor John Medinger to call for a city-wide referendum on the issue.

Planners claim the road is necessary to meet future transportation demands. Opponents claim the road is unnecessary and compromises the integrity of the 1,100-acre marsh that lies at the city’s center. The project would be scheduled to begin in 2010, if the people of the city agree to foot the $8 million to $10 million that would be the local share, according to the *La Crosse Tribune* (12-11-97).

In June 1997, Taxpayers for Common Sense listed the proposed road as one of the worst proposed highway projects in the nation.

**Fear Locks and Dams?**

North Carolina — The Army Corps of Engineers has asked Congress to fund a $1 million, two-year study to assess whether the 60-year-old lock-and-dam system on the Cape Fear...
River in North Carolina should be dismantled. Highway shipping has replaced the barge industry between Wilmington and Fayetteville, so environmentalists argue that freeing the river, which would help migratory fish to reach spawning grounds, makes good sense. The study will assess how removing the locks and dams would affect recreational boating, water quality and the drinking-water supply for Wilmington, according to the Charlotte Observer (11-22-97).

Limits Apply to Tournaments

Minnesota — Public opposition to waiving Minnesota angling rules for bass tournaments has convinced the Department of Natural Resources. Of 172 responses during a public comment period, 138 opposed granting special rules for tournaments.

Bass tournament promoters had asked for permission to exceed the limit for the number of fish that can be held, so that tournaments could have public weigh-ins in an effort to turn the placid art of fishing into more of a spectator sport.

NSP Backs Off

Red Wing, Minn. — Northern States Power Co. (NSP) announced it will not ask the 1998 Minnesota Legislature for permission to store more nuclear waste casks at its Prairie Island plant, near Red Wing, Minnesota.

NSP was backed into a corner by a massive public protest to a proposed off-plant storage site in Florence Township, in southeast Goodhue County, and by its own promise in 1994 to never again seek more storage on the plant site. Plant managers say they will use more efficient handling of nuclear materials to extend their current storage capacity to 2007.

The company’s ace in the hole, however, is the effort of a consortium of utilities, which includes NSP, to push through a storage facility in Utah for nuclear waste from all over the country. If approved, plants could begin sending spent fuel there by 2002, according to the St. Paul Pioneer Press (12-6-97).

Alien Exchange

In a reversal of the process that brought alien zebra mussels from the Great Lakes into the Mississippi River, three alien species of carp and a microscopic zooplankton may soon travel from the Mississippi into the Great Lakes. The alien invaders have approached to within a few miles of Lake Michigan via the canals that connect it to the Illinois River.

The new fish invaders are the grass carp, big-head carp and black carp which escaped from Arkansas fish farms and headed upriver. River and lake biologists are not sure what effect the alien species will have on other fish, but they are likely to compete for food with perch, walleye and salmon.

The other culprit behind much of this species invasion and counter-invasion seems to be the shipping industry, which dumps infested ballast water from other places in the world into the lakes and the Mississippi.

That’s probably how the microscopic zooplankton, Daphnia lumholtzi, travelled from African waters to North America. Biologists say the eggs of the Daphnia may also travel, in dried form, on the feet of waterfowl, according to the St. Paul Pioneer Press (12-7-97).

RV Voyage

So cruising the Mississippi with an Elvis impersonator isn’t your cup of joe (see Big River, December 1997). Then how about taking your RV for a float on the river. RV River Charters, a New Orleans-based compa-
**River Calendar**

### Special Events & Festivals

**January**

3 **Snowshoe Festival**, 10 a.m. - 3 p.m., race at 11 a.m., French Regional Park, Plymouth, Minn., (612) 559-6769.

4 and 11 **Guided Snowshoe Hike**, 1:30 p.m., West Coon Rapids Dam Regional Park, Brooklyn Park, Minn., reservations, (612) 424-8172.

12 **Walk When the Moon is Full**, 7 p.m., West Coon Rapids Dam, (612) 424-8172.

12 **Fundraiser to protest the Rerouting of Highway 55**, 7:30 p.m., Bryant Lake Bowl, Minneapolis, (612) 825-8949.

21-25 **Boat show**, Minneapolis Convention Center.


24-25 **Winterfest**, Lake City, Minnesota.

31 **Old Fashioned Ice Harvest**, noon - 4 p.m., winter activities for kids, Hyland Lake, Minneapolis, Minn., (612) 941-4362.

**February**

7 **Frontenac Sportsman's Club Ice Fishing Contest**, Frontenac, Minn.

7 **Pepin Lions Club Ice Fishing Contest**, Pepin, Wis.


28 **Grumpy Old Men Festival**, Wabasha, Minn.

### Meeting & Hearings

**January**

15 **The Future of Flooding**, 8 p.m. - 10 p.m., public forum with climatologists, geologists and the Army Corps, Appleton, Minn., (320) 269-2105.

17 **Legislative Forum**, 1:30 p.m. - 3:30 p.m., Izak Walton League Agassiz Chapter, public invited, Mahtomedi (Minn.) Middle School, (612) 221-0215.

**February**

4 **Hiawatha Valley Audubon Society**, monthly meeting, 7 p.m., (new time), Winona, Minn., (507) 452-8904.

21 **Clean Up Our River Environment**, annual meeting, 5:30 p.m., Granite Falls, Minn., (320) 269-2105.

### Workshops & Conferences

**January**

22-23 **New Orleans Maritime Seminar**, sponsored by Tulane Law School, Royal Sonesta Hotel, New Orleans, 1-800-569-5272.

**February**

3 **Farmer-Environmentalist Day of Dialogue on Water Quality**, 9 a.m. - 3 p.m., Good Counsel Education Center, Mankato, Minn., The Minnesota Project, 1-800-366-4793.

28 **State of the Rivers, Rivers Council of Minnesota, Hamline University, St. Paul**, public invited. Purpose: to create a statewide river protection strategy. (218) 457-3675, or email riversmn@eot.com.

### Correction

We slipped up on a story in the December 1997 Big River. We identified “Saved by the Buckets” as a personal narrative. Actually the story was told to Kris Fitzgerald, of Sparta, Wisconsin, who wrote it up and shared it with us.

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**Almanac**

*By Kenny Salvey*

Moon shadows dance on crusty snow; they seem to hurry as a north wind howls down the big river valley. I can barely hear my snowshoe bindings creak above the moaning wind. My face feels like a frozen pork chop... man, it will feel good to get next to the woodstove!

It's a full moon night. I think of the critters hunkered down out there waiting for morning. Beneath the frozen earth, green things hunker down, too. They sleep the winter away in peaceful bliss. I'm just thinking about how nice it would be to get away from it all, to dig my shovel into a warm, soft snowbank and just lie there, dreaming of spring.

The absence of bird calls sets January apart as the quiet month. In a day or two, one might hear only a handful of songs — chickadees, crows, blue jays. About the third week, sometimes the "January thaw" occurs. Winter weather brings critters and river folk out of the woodwork. All things seem to revel in their reprieve from the white winds of winter.

January is a month of contemplation, fireplaces, hot chocolate, popcorn, chess and card games and good conversation. Try to remember the wild things, and help make life good for them because in our warm homes we seem more comfortable wouldn't you say, my friends?

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