*Back Home by Chris Hardie*

**Viewing nature in the backyard**

I am blessed to live in the country where the solitude of the woods and the wonders of nature and animal life are literally just feet from my doorstep.

But sometimes I don’t even have to leave the confines of the house as wildlife scenes play out just outside my windows. Our bird feeding station with its combination of black oil sunflowers and suet cakes attracts all sorts of avian eaters.

We’ve had several pairs of cardinals, chickadees, woodpeckers, doves, many sparrows and a few blue jays. The latter certainly live up to their reputation as the bully birds, as the others scatter when the jays are feeding. We had five blue jays imposing martial law at our two feeding stations recently. But there’s plenty of food for all.

Recently we had a visitor that I have not seen at our feeder – a pileated woodpecker. And the bird was not actually dining on seed but was helping himself to the dried fruits on one of our crabapple trees.

The tree has long attracted birds and other wildlife. Several years ago my wife Sherry spotted an opossum clinging to the tree eating the fruit. Opossums are great climbers because of their opposable thumbs on their hind feet and their long prehensile tails that can wrap around tree limbs.

The pileated woodpecker – the inspiration for the animated character Woody Woodpecker – can’t be missed. Its featured red crest is striking but it’s huge by bird standards. Compared to the downy woodpecker which is about 6 inches long, pileated woodpeckers can be up to 19 inches long with a wingspan of more than 2 feet.

The scientific name for pileated woodpeckers is drycopus pileatus, with drycopus meaning tree cleaver and pileatus meaning capped. I’ve seen the birds while hunting deer and have witnessed their cleaving capability with large holes wide drilled into dead trees as the woodpeckers seek carpenter ants.

I’ve also heard the drumming noise they make on trees and logs and the loud cuk-cuk-cuk-cuk-cuk call that rises and falls in pitch and volume that is parodied by Woody Woodpecker. A few years ago there was a dead tree near my deer stand that was riddled with holes and a pileated made a loud chattering noise as it flew through the valley.

Thankfully we don’t have wooden siding or ants in the house, as woodpeckers will cause lots of damage to your house if they decide that they want food under the siding.

The bird feeders also attract some non-feathered friends like pesky squirrels who when they aren’t causing power outages can thwart most alleged squirrel-proof feeders. Our feeders are not squirrel proof – I just figure they’re going to eat what they want anyway. Rabbits also like to hang out under the feeders, cleaning up the spilled seeds. And turkeys like to scratch up the yard too.

But that’s nothing compared to Brad and Lori Chown of Black River Falls who have had not only deer but also elk in their yard. They captured photos of the dozen or so elk in early December. The elk are part of the herd that was released into Jackson County several years ago and range far and wide across the county.

We also get deer, but we’re a little far west of the elk range, although they do wander around.

The bears – they just should stay sleeping.

*Chris Hardie spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor and publisher. He was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and won dozens of state and national journalism awards. He is a former president of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association. Contact him at* *chardie1963@gmail.com**.*

Cutlines:

Elk: A herd of elk decide to graze in the backyard of Brad and Lori Chown of Black River Falls. Brad Chown photo.

Feeder: This bird feeder needs to be filled every-other day to keep up with the hungry birds on Chris Hardie's farm. Chris Hardie photo.

Female cardinal: A female cardinal perches outside Chris Hardie's window. Chris Hardie photo.

Male cardinal: A male cardinal sits in the crabapple tree. Chris Hardie photo.

Opossum: An opossum is attracted to the crabapple tree. Sherry Hardie photo.

Pileated: A pileated woodpecker eats crabapples. Chris Hardie photo.