

DUCK CREEK

Golden Anniversary Renovation

Something is bugging me...

Do you ever wonder what's going on in the woods outside of waterfowl season? Have you ever tromped around in the flooded timber when it is frozen over? If you have, chances are you've decided not to do it again for a while....or at least wait until your bruised shins have recovered. Unfortunately, this year we had the opportunity to do this during the waterfowl season a couple of times.

Sometimes I'm a glutton for punishment and like to get out in less than ideal conditions to see what I can see. During one of these excursions through the frozen timber I noticed a whole new world at my feet as I took a break from chipping at the hard, icy surface. Of course, the first thing I saw through the tea colored water was the carpet of submerged leaves. As I gazed at the interface between the leaves and zig-zag patterned ice, I came across something unexpected. Close up, it looked like something you would see in a sci-fi movie. It was a large helgramite clinging to the bottom of the icesheet. (Helgramites have large, ferocious looking jaws and are the larvae of Dobsonflies. These aquatic critters are often used for fish bait.) Upon further inspection, I noticed smaller flecks darting back and forth within the tannic water column. These tiny critters were freshwater scuds or amphipods.

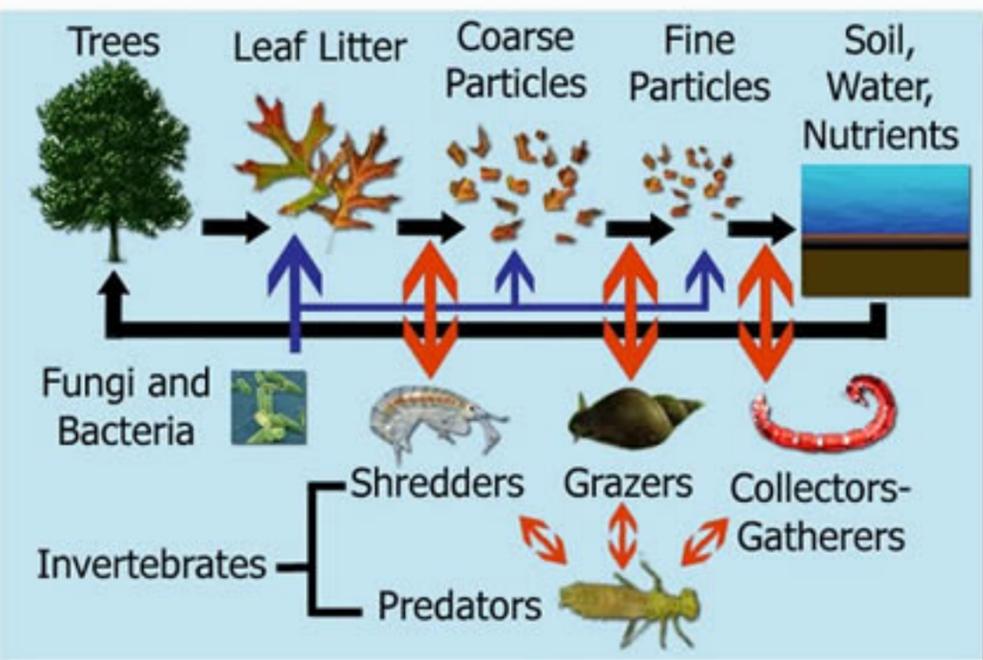
Although there were no mallards flying over the forest canopy, below the frozen surface, the forest was cooking with activity.

A whole host of invertebrates and microbes virtually come to life when the forest floor becomes flooded each fall and it all starts with the leaf litter. Each year, as the leaves are flooded, an army of microbes and bugs work to break them down into finer and finer particles. If the leaves are the crust, then these microbes are the pizza toppings that attract the bugs to start shredding this "leafy supreme pizza". Freshwater scuds and crayfish fall into this first category. Once these fragments pass through the shredders, the microbes recolonize and there is another group of bugs that key into these smaller particles. Grazers, such as pond and orb snails, start to feed on the microbe covered particles. As the debris is broken down further, midge larvae and fingernail clams target these fine litter fragments on the forest floor and water column. This group is called the collector-gatherers. Finally, predators, such as predatory diving beetles and dragonfly nymphs, feast on these other working class bugs. In this manner the leaf litter is broken down into nutrients that are either incorporated into the water column or soil and then are once again accessible to the plants to use.

The rich abundance of bugs means a premiere buffet for wintering and spring migrating waterfowl, which just so happens to be the time when hen mallards need to start gorging on protein rich foods in preparation of their pre-basic molt and staging for the breeding grounds.

Although acorns get the majority of attention as a key food source in the timber, the interaction and role that invertebrates play for the bottomland forest shouldn't be undersold. They help the forest stay productive and keep the birds moving north in good body condition so that we can enjoy them again next fall.

So don't bug me next time it freezes and you don't think anything is going on in the flooded timber. Go out and take a look for yourself...or save your shins and take my word for it. There is always something cool going on in the timber.



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