

# THOSE OF THE FOREST



Hunch down for a rabbit's-eye view  
of winter woods in the reissue  
of this classic Wisconsin nature story.

Wallace Byron Grange

*Editor's note: Among the remarkable men and women who shaped Wisconsin's conservation heritage, few left as lasting a legacy as Wallace Byron Grange. Naturalist, ecologist, journalist and tireless worker, Grange was hired as Wisconsin's first superintendent of game in 1928 at the tender age of 22. His two-year tenure was memorable for starting the game farm system that led to a state program of stocking animals, rebuilding wildlife populations and restoring wildlife habitat that had been devastated from the lumbering heyday (1870-1890s) and subsistence farming in the early 1900s.*

*Grange was ahead of his time. He understood that wild animals needed diverse habitats — a mixture of swamps, forests, plains, fields — food and water. Moreover, he practiced what he preached. Grange and his wife Hazel raised game birds and animals in Door County for five years. During the Depression, the Granges pooled their limited savings and bought thousands of tax-delinquent acres in central Wisconsin. As recounted by writer Don L. Johnson, "The Granges moved to their new property in 1937, and during the*

*next 25 years they triumphed over diverse obstacles, environmental barriers as well as bureaucratic entanglements, to restore that land to its natural state. Eventually, Hazel and Wallace were able to convert more than 9,000 acres of derelict land into a conservation showplace." How that property was reworked and subsequently donated to the people of Wisconsin as the Sandhill Wildlife Demonstration Area is a story we will share later this summer.*

*For now, let us admire Grange as ecologist and author. Those of the Forest was written as a twenty-fifth wedding anniversary present for Hazel. It's a nature story equally appealing to young readers and adults. It tracks the life of a snowshoe rabbit (or varying hare) named Snowshoe, and his offspring through the course of two years. A latter section of the book takes readers on a journey through forest evolution from the Ice Age through modern times.*

*Three selections from the book's wintery beginnings follow. In the opening, Snowshoe faces some rough weather.*

The snow-world grays into dusk; then blackness. Color vanished with the dim sun.

Life, too, it seems, journeyed over the hills to sleep below the horizon for the night.

There remains in the world the

bleakness of more snow, sifting, sifting, sifting, interminably downward; steadily, rapidly, inexorably — tiny, hard, sharp, broken flakes jostling in their wind-tossed descent.

The wind is here with the snow.

It races across the miles, down

from the sky, over the lake, through the hills, upon marsh and prairie and forest. It turns aside, seemingly, for no barrier, asks leave of nothing, living or dead; stays its force for no obstacle.

Tonight, the wind and snow are

the law. They are the elemental authority of all nature. This night, other forces do their bidding. The wind and the snow exert all their power. They drive, ride, march, swirl — and possess the earth.

Yet the wind and snow are serfs of cold.

It is cold that squeezes the moisture of the sky into crystal-white flakes. It is cold that signals the north wind on to lower and warmer latitudes. It is cold that follows wind and snow, taking control of the great battered white world, freezing knife-carved drifts, hardening the crystal robe which at first lies loosely upon the earth.

The wind, the snow, and the cold give way only to the sun. To it, eventually, they give obedience; unwilling, perhaps, but disciplined. If their elemental forces are rebellious tonight it matters not, for in good time the sun will control them; if not this day then the next, or the day after; if not in January then in May, but in the end, always.

Tonight, the sun seems no longer to exist.

It is gone behind the hills. It will not be back until earth turns again; until the forest meets dawn.

Unimpeded, the wind, the snow, and the cold race on; three icy elemental forces which howl, sting, and numb.

It is no night for a timid rabbit.

Even in the spreading shelter of the spruces in the lee of the ridge along this swampy pocket, only one of the three elemental forces is to any perceptible degree frustrated.

The wind, it is true, has spent some of its fury upon the supple cedars, upon the swaying figures of the spruces and the bare tamaracks. The wind intrudes less strongly into this little cavern beneath the lower branches of the swamp trees.

But the chilly snow sifts down, much of it scarcely delayed a moment

by the mad brushings of boughs.

The cold is here, down to the very surface of the snow. Even below the snow, it seeks the subterranean root and the vast soil which snow, in a manner, protects.

It is to this sheltered cavern beneath the evergreens — to a relative quiet — that the rabbit has come. Experience has brought him to his one sure sanctuary from storm.

He is not alone. The deer is here, bedded down on the other side of the swamp: The deer and his herd, for this is their habitual winter home.

The wolf is here, nose under tail in



a patch of willows at the cove, where interlaced branches and snow have all but built him a roof.

The owl is here, in the jungle of the densest trees, huddled close to the trunk of a black spruce, feathers fluffed to insulate its body from the fury.

All those of the forest are here; those of the winter forest.

The rabbit does not see or hear them all, each in its own niche, crevice, cavity, nest, den, or bed. He does not see the downy woodpecker and the chickadee which the vicissitudes of the blizzard have brought roosting for the night in the same hollow aspen tree on the tiny swamp island; nor the red squirrel sleeping in a full bushel of moss, leaves, and soft bark of which it has made a treetop nest in a cedar; nor the black bear living on its own fat in its den not far below a

huge white pine stump; nor the woodchuck several feet down in the ground, unmindful, in its hibernating torpor, of the storm raging through the night above. The rabbit does not see, among the logs, in the careless brushheaps of fallen trees, in the sedges and the grasses, in the buried litter of the forest floor, or in their snow tunnels, the deer mice, the meadow mice, the red-backed mice, and the shrews; or the weasel which will later follow them.

But, seen or unseen, sleeping or awake, they are here, each in its own manner protected from the wind,

from the snow, and from the cold; each pitted against the winter elements — and surviving.

Not all those of the forest have come, as has the rabbit, to the swamp. In the channeled bole of a maple on the nearby ridge, a colony of carpenter ants are as motionless as death this winter night, and will not awaken until spring. The beaver in its lodge in the pond near the swamp gnaws the green bark of an aspen twig, away from the wind, the

snow, and the cold, for these are shut out from its world tonight by the ice of the pond. A chrysalid on a dogwood rocks roughly in the wind. In a slow eddy downstream from a rock, below the open riffles of the brook, a cluster of hibernating frogs wash gently to and fro in the water.

Seeds, and roots, and buds are sleeping. Insects, larvae, and eggs lie dormant in wood, humus, and soil. Algae and bacteria, now wholly quiescent, nevertheless survive.

By how many thousands of circumstances and stratagems the things of the forest turn aside, or circumvent, or tolerate, the wind and the snow and the cold that own the world tonight!



*In this second selection, Grange describes how natural food webs transfer nutrition and energy as a rabbit is preyed upon by an owl.*

Then from the direction of the shrub-covered swamp cove there is a quick series of bleating screams; startled, plaintive, terror-stricken bleats of a single undulating syllable vehemently repeated five times. The sound ends suddenly; unfinished.

Snowshoe scurries under the sweetferns, into one of his former beds.

He sits quietly, unable to see about him, unseen by any others of the forest nearby.

Although the forest is silent except for the rustle of ferns and grasses, the terror in the dying rabbit's shrill crescendo cry remains with Snowshoe in the sweetferns.

The great horned owl eats but a mouthful of the rabbit, then casts the body aside, dropping it to the snow. The owl swoops low along the edge of the swamp toward the hemlock, at the far end of the ridge, in which it will roost during the day. The owl and its mate are already satiated, for hunting has been good. What matters the life of one rabbit?

It is mid-morning. Snowshoe is still hidden in his sweetfern bed.

The air is pierced by the coarsely hollow croak of a raven. Snowshoe listens to the sound: "Craack, craack." It comes from above the swamp, toward the cove. Then it moves lower toward the treetops. Two other ravens answer: "Cr-r-ruck, pr-uck" and "Pr-ruck, cr-r-ruck."

The three ravens cease their circling just over the trees near the shrub-covered cove and drop down to the feast.

So has occurred the alchemy of existence by which a rabbit ceases to be rabbit and becomes owl, or raven, or wolf, instead: the hunted becoming the hunter, flesh of its flesh, bone of its bone. Yesterday, the rabbit's physical substance was cellulose and wood sugar in the bark of a pine — until pine became rabbit. Last night the rabbit hopped upon four feet and listened to the haunting voice of the owl. This night it flies across the swamp on wings, listens and looks for unwary rabbits, and becomes the voice of the owl. The chemicals of rocks, the crystals of snow, the atoms in water, the unseen microscopic fungi and bacteria and protozoa of

the soil, the rays of the sun and the light of stars, the wind, the intangibles of time and space, are all changed and interchanged, given and received, taken back, passed on and returned, in one form of energy after another — ceaselessly and imperishably, for nothing is lost. Between the exchanges, assisting them, depending upon them, are the multitudinous forms of life — the plant and animal kingdoms, so different, so alike. And perhaps nothing in life is lost, any more than is physical energy. New forms, new combinations, new arrangements — transformations — but which of the basic building blocks of the universe since the dawn of Creation has had anything added to it or taken from it?

... Only beyond the bleating, terrified cry of the dying rabbit is the answer.

... As a rabbit, Snowshoe lives his rabbit life. Life is his freedom. Freedom is his life. He cannot preserve one and let go of the other. However much or little he may try, or not try, to understand life, he strives in every moment of his existence to live.

*Like good westerns, good nature stories need chase scenes, and this book has several. In this final selection, Snowshoe faces coyotes.*

Snowshoe is almost ready to leave the thicket and return to the swamp, but has stopped for a last few bits of bark.

He hears the tinkling of the crust. He sits up, turning toward the sound, moves his ears until they locate its direction accurately. It is some distance away, but approaching. Snowshoe waits no longer. He starts toward the swamp evergreens, leaping at half-speed.

Then, almost before he knows it, he sees the coyote that waits in the opening, and she is rushing toward him. It is too late to return to the jackpines. Snowshoe makes a mad dash, leaping with every modicum of speed his legs contain. But the coyote is quick, and just behind him.

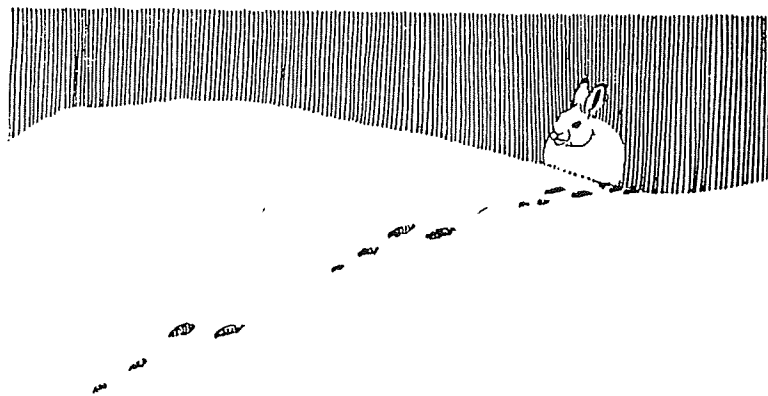
Now the coyote breaks into full voice, uttering a series of yips, yelps and howls, which tumble from her mouth so clamorously that the medley is of almost indistinguishable elements, rising and falling in a weirdly terrifying cadence. Snowshoe feels panic. Unsuspected new power comes into his legs, every cell in his body marshals latent physical strength within him, pouring adrenalin into his veins, stimulating his reserves of power, giving him the supreme drive and coordination of which he is capable.

For an instant, Snowshoe is almost in the grasp of the racing coyote, but the fallen maple top — the one in which the grouse sunned themselves — looms up. Snowshoe plunges within it, through it, under it, turns around and is back through it again while the coyote's momentum carries her a few feet beyond. In her slight delay, Snowshoe gains distance, and races for the alders. The coyote turns in pursuit, but has lost several yards.

Snowshoe reaches the spruces be-

yond the alders, dodges from the main runway to a lateral, then to another, without slowing his speed, then flees for the swamp's center. For the moment, the coyote is out of sight, but still following.

The coyote does not hesitate. The scent of rabbit is heavy and fresh. It is unnecessary to hold her nose close to the trail. Although Snowshoe is out of sight, she follows his every dodge accurately, knowing that her lungs will outlast the rabbit's; certain that if she gives the rabbit no rest, she will soon have him.



OLAVUS J. MURIE

Snowshoe seeks all the dense places he knows, where the spaces between the trees are wide enough for him but too narrow for the coyote; under logs where runways branch, momentarily confusing his pursuer. He is skillful with his own experience and with that inherited from his forbears.

But the coyote is skillful, too. She cuts corners as she sniffs out directly the scent ahead where Snowshoe ran circuitously. Wherever possible she plunges through them, but jumps into and through those she cannot avoid. Yet, for some time the coyote follows the trail silently, without gaining the ground necessary to the kill. The panic within Snowshoe increases. He races toward the tangle of windfallen tamaracks, which cover

nearly an acre, where the fallen trees crisscross one another, and where, between them, young tamarack saplings grow densely.

But within moments of reaching this protective shelter the coyote reaches it, too, and threshes about in the tangle, scrambling under, jumping over, pushing through, wriggling, into Snowshoe's hiding places. But Snowshoe now has the advantage of size, and can move quickly from one place to another, and back again, without being driven from his best refuge covert.

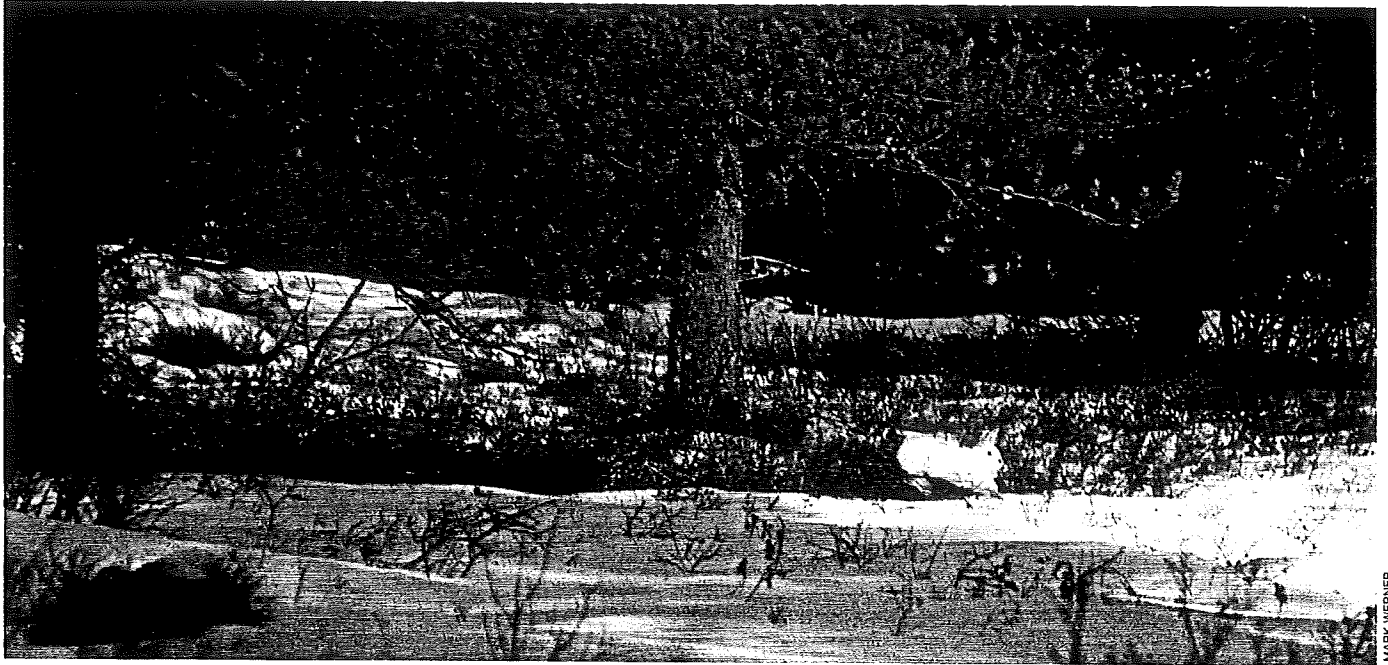
Nevertheless, no matter where, or how often, he moves within his tangled shelter, the relentless coyote works toward him, her panting loud in the cold air. Snowshoe has time to catch his own breath as the coyote scrambles about. In the pattern of shadows and white patches beneath the windfalls, the odds seem greatly to favor the rabbit. Snowshoe might, if necessary, move about

within this tangle all night without being captured.

Then, suddenly, he realizes that there are two coyotes threshing about, on one side of the covert. The danger that they will work him into a corner, from which he will either have to dash between them, or be closely pursued out through the open woods, increases by the minute. If he remains, he may run from the jaws of one into the jaws of the other.

Snowshoe hops quickly across the widest section of the windfallen shelter, then darts from it — unseen — and out through the spruces toward the alders. It is a considerable distance. He covers it rapidly. He is nearly exhausted. Arriving at the border of the swamp, he sits motionless for a moment.

Then, certainly, surely, inescap-



MARK WERNER

ably, it seems, he hears a coyote panting toward him, threading in and out of the shadows and moonlight. Snowshoe bursts away, into the alders, following from long habit the runways he knows best although, on the strong crust, he might jump anywhere with equal speed. He is more familiar with the coverts than is the coyote, but the coyote is faster. Snowshoe tries to redouble his speed. The coyote, close at his heels as they approach the willow cove, once more sets up the pandemonium of its excited cries; a great concordance of yelps and howls tumbled together. The sound increases the terror within Snowshoe. His breath comes rapidly, his nostrils dilate and contract, his heart pounds, his legs work frantically; but no longer has he any feeling of exhaustion; only one thing in all the world matters — he must escape, he must live!

But where can he hide? Where can the coyote not follow? The coyote is too cunning, too relentless, too tireless, and as Snowshoe races for his life the wild panic within him knows no caution; he throws everything but speed to the winds, possessed solely by his desperation. The coyote is some distance behind, but space and time now seem to hang motionless in the moonlight, every second an eon

long, every leap a distance as the length of the swamp.

Then Snowshoe hears, from diagonally ahead, the quick bark of the second coyote. It has cut across the angle of their course, and is now following the noise of the chase attentively, about to choose carefully at what point it can best rush in for the kill.

Snowshoe reaches the shrub-flat. Immediately ahead are two rabbits crouched beside a bog birch. Snowshoe jumps headlong between them. For an instant, all three are tumbled together, then each is rushing for its life. Snowshoe turns, makes an enormous leap at right angles to his previous course, makes several more jumps with his utmost strength, then changes his course — back — toward the spruces, along a runway he knows from one end to the other. Beneath the first spruce, he pauses; waiting, listening, trying to breathe, for he feels suffocated.

He hears the puffing of the coyote, the squeaking of its heavy foot pads on the crust; hears the coyote sniff momentarily at the bog birch, then rush onward in the direction the two other rabbits fled. He hears nothing of the second coyote; its location and its scheme are unknown.

Snowshoe listens to the commo-

tion of the brush-wolf as the predator hunts on. It does not know that Snowshoe has successfully handed the chase to his neighbor rabbits. As the sound fades into the distance, Snowshoe turns his head upward and casually nips off a twig of black spruce.

The moonlight is soft above him, and a little of it filters down beside him through the canopy of the swamp, making images of twigs and branches upon the snow; a pattern, a design, which includes elements of earth and moon, spruce and snow, and the round shadow of a rabbit.

From the direction of the far side of the cove, two coyotes blend their voices in a wavering song. In its cadence is the wild, fierce intensity of life's struggle in the forest, and all the soft shadows of earth in the moonlit night.

Snowshoe listens. But not for one moment does he stop chewing his morsel of spruce.

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*Those of the Forest was originally published in 1953. It was reissued last year by Willow Creek Press, now a part of NorthWord Press, Inc. of Minocqua, Wis. Excerpts and illustrations used with permission of the publisher.*