

So Long, and Thanks For All the Ticks

By Lou Bendrick

There's a character in the whacky sci-fi novel *So Long, and Thanks For All the Fish*, the fourth book in the famous *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* series by Douglas Adams, who is constantly tormented by bad weather. What the character, a truck driver, doesn't know is that he's a Rain God, cherished by the clouds.

For a while I thought my dog was also a god—one cherished by blood-sucking insects.

It's one thing for a dog, even a Berkshire dog, to pick up ticks in the woods, but it seemed improbable that mine could pick up so many in a suburban neighborhood full of asphalt and groomed lawns. To my dismay, he returned from a walk around the block studded like an orange-and-clove pomander.

The Berkshires, like many other parts of New England are now a place where "bull's-eye rash" is part of the lexicon. We are learning to live with the disease, which is good because the passenger pigeons aren't coming back. Given what we now know, hunting may be a ham-fisted approach to a delicate, complex problem.

At first the reasons for so many ticks seemed obvious to a relative newcomer like me. Western Massachusetts is a pretty place where we build lots of pretty houses in pretty meadows that deer once called home. So, much to the disbelief of dogs everywhere, white-tailed deer clomp around the gardens of the Berkshires, eating tulips and spreading ticks and Lyme disease. One of my neighbors believes that a robust hunting season could cure this problem.

Yet hunting, some scientists theorize, may be one of the reasons why we have a Lyme disease epidemic in the first place. Once upon a time, passenger pigeons were once so numerous in America that they darkened the sky when they migrated by the millions. These fast-flying birds with scarlet eyes were also tasty and easy to kill, which our ancestors did with ever-improving guns and nets, and by clearing the forests. Passenger pigeons it turned out, had a fondness for acorns, which oak trees in eastern forests create in profusion every couple of years to keep seed-eating animals happy, and to ensure seedlings. Without the passenger pigeons to gobble up

the acorns, populations of white-footed mice thrive on the nuts. These mice, which are born at the same time of year as ticks, are carriers for the bacterium that causes Lyme disease. The mice give it to the ticks, which in turn jump onto white-tailed deer, which are also drawn to the abundance of acorns.

I anthropomorphize this event, picturing an animal feast deep in the woods with all sorts of critters gathered around an acorn-laden table. There's an empty seat of course, which belongs to the passenger pigeon. The last one, Martha, died in captivity in 1914, and resides for all eternity at the Smithsonian Institution. (I picture her, like a character straight out of a Douglas Adams novel, wisecracking from her glass case. "So, a mouse, a deer and a tick walk into a bar ... and then the deer says, 'I'll have mine with a twist of Lyme'... but seriously folks....")

Deer populations are thriving here most likely due to the lack of predators—mountain lions were largely driven away from New England by hunters. Along with



the lack of large predators and all-you-can-eat acorn buffets, increasingly mild winters in New England may be a factor in the baby boom for deer. It's not surprising that, for the 2004 season, *New England Game & Fish Magazine* told hunters to expect "good numbers of deer in most areas, especially in urban wood lots and coastal zones, where whitetail numbers have skyrocketed in recent years." Eventually, the white-tailed deer deposit ticks into the gardens, where dogs like mine will unearth an old rawhide, roll onto their backs in ecstasy, and pick up the wee vampires.

My dog is not a Tick God, merely a typical case when it comes to Lyme disease here. Of the 600 dogs my vet clinic treated last year, 40 percent tested

positive for Lyme disease and one-third of them were sick. "It's the number-one disease we see," says Daniel Gulick, the vet who told me the bad news that my dog, too, had tested positive.

Although the number of new cases of Lyme in humans declined in Massachusetts last year, the news was not good for Berkshire County, which ranks fourth among the state's 14 counties in terms of having the most reported cases. Reported instances here more than doubled between 1998 and 2000. The Berkshires, like many other parts of New England are now a place where "bull's-eye rash" is part of the lexicon. We are learning to live with the disease, which is good because the passenger pigeons aren't coming back. Given what we now know, hunting may be a ham-fisted approach to a delicate, complex problem. As Adams pointed out in the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, we humans are essentially ape-descended life forms so primitive that we think digital watches are a "pretty neat idea."

In the *Hitchhiker's* series Adams's characters search for the meaning of life. In the fourth book, Adams gave it to them. The meaning of life turns out to be ... 42. This number, which at first glance seems laughably nonsensical, I think represents something too complex for our comprehension, and yet at the same time so simple that it's right under our noses. In other words, it's like an ecosystem. Adams, who died in 2001, certainly understood the complexity of nature. He and zoologist Mark Carwardine wrote a book with a heartbreaking title, *Last Chance To See*, which followed their adventures filming the world's most endangered animals for the BBC.

The motto among fans of Adams's sci-fi series became "Don't Panic," a message that appears in "large, friendly letters" on the front page of the copy of the hitchhiker's guide his main character totes around the universe. Here on Earth, my dog has just returned from the yard with a neck full of ticks, exhausted from barking at the deer grazing in my neighbor's tender spring garden. It's a strangely warm day, and, who knows, it might be a banner year for oak trees. Meanwhile, the last passenger pigeon sits like a stuffed harbinger of doom in a museum. In moments of environmental anxiety, I hear the bird talking to me. *Don't panic*, I tell myself. "Don't panic," she repeats, and I think she's mocking me.

Lou Bendrick, of Great Barrington, Massachusetts, is a regular contributor to Northern Sky News.



PHOTOS: ©GEORGE WUERTHNER

NORTHEAST



WILDERNESS
TRUST

P.O. Box 406

Montpelier, VT 05601

802-253-7970

www.newwildernesstrust.org

info@newwildernesstrust.org

Preserving wild places for future generations. Contact us today.