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Bay Reflections

Lessons of the Storm

From icicles, stalactites and mockingbirds — how we learn

by Ricky Rood

This morning I opened the blinds on the windows that look to the south, across the field, onward to Chesapeake Bay. The snow from the storm was deep enough to cover the stubble of the summer's corn. At the shore, the smooth ice cracked and stirred by the tides and waves. Beyond, the clear wintertime water of the Bay met the blue of the sky.



A curtain of ice folded over the edge of my roof, making a thick kurtain with the morning sun. The edge of the curtain shredded into a veil of glowing icicles. Below, from the holly bush, a mound of clouded ice lay upward on the tip of a branch. A tenuous thread of ice connected the mound with the roof.

A mockingbird landed less than two feet from my eyes. A drop of water beaded on its feathers. The bird, tailored in gray and white, drew from the reliable stream of water running down the ice. Till then the bird took long drinks. Occasionally a drop would land on its tail, never startling the bird with its seemingly desperate thirst.

Does the bird simply search for water by sight, smell or sound, or does it know to go looking for icicles? Does it search for icicles wherever it flies during the day? Or once it finds the source on my holly bush, does it only return for another search?

As Close As We Get to Truth

The spikes of ice hanging from my roof and the little mounds on the holly bush are like the lime and mineral stalactites hang from the ceiling, and stalagmites reach up from layered mounds on the floor. Rock-cicles form drips, each on their own seeming to fall away but leaving a little relic that accumulates into brittle Gothic gargoyles.

Did we have to understand icicles before we understood the caverns? As a scientist, I often wonder whether we have seen the birds flying, would flight have ever entered our minds. Can we only grasp the unknown with building on what is known?

The powdery snow has been moved around not only by plows but also by days of cold winds. In the building, the four wings are arranged like fingers spread apart. Within the space between the wings, there have been wind tunnels with snow. All of the snow has been moved from one side, leaving bare ground to the other side, patterned like a desert.

These dunes are little different in form from the sand dunes of Death Valley. In fact, away from the dirty pile line the streets and parking lots, you can see the American West in the snow. Dunes, slot canyons, hoodoos sculpted and dripped next to retaining walls, behind piles of construction gravel. Everywhere there are edge effects that make you believe in geology.

Lessons come from observation, and applying those lessons to understanding other phenomena is one of the tasks of science. We try to challenge those lessons. How well do they apply; how well do they generalize? If the lessons

start to believe we understand, start to believe that we can predict. When the old lessons fail, we learn som

We all have stories of blizzards that arrive, unannounced, from the south. Sometimes, we prepare for snow
The failed predictions are used to chide the weather forecasters. Meteorology is a science that, more than i
warts when the old lessons fail.

Most physical science is deliberated in the arcane machinations of peer-reviewed journals, but meteorologi
with full and instant television coverage. Despite all of the glory and boast of supercomputers and sophistic
models, we are reminded that we are simulating a complex, perhaps chaotic, reality, using the best approxir
can afford, that we can understand.

Approximations.

The sophisticated models represent the lessons we have learned expressed as mathematical equations. Th
approximations and assumptions in the models sometimes surprise us with harsh, brilliant ice.

It is pleasing to see Death Valley's Eureka Dunes in the striated snow of your yard and think you understan
circumstances of mountain ranges and winds that build waves of sand 700 feet high. But you only can go s
explain stalactites as stone icicles. We have to dissect and examine the similitude. Otherwise, every new th
search, and soon we learn to only stay close to our holly bushes and drink from the stream that we know.

Comments

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