Awareness Quiz
by Tamarack Song

A few days ago a woman showed me a Downy Woodpecker feather she found on a hike. Assuming it was a tail feather, further assuming from its crumpled appearance that it was pulled out by a predator, and even further assuming that the event happened in the past couple days (because of the feather laying atop new snow), she told me the story of the bird's demise.

Every one of her assumptions was wrong. It was a wing feather, moulted by an adolescent and then used as construction material in a nest, which had disintegrated under the weight of snow. The woman got off track because she tried to tell the feather's story rather than listening to the story feather had to tell. When we begin with a wrong assumption it is inevitable that our following assumptions will be even more off-base.

As with this woman, making assumptions is what most of us would normally do, because our schooling has trained us by rewarding answers rather than questions. In the wilderness those who ask questions, live, and those who are quick with answers, die young.

Fortunately, our natural tendency is to question. I help the students I work with to renew their questioning ability by continually challenging them to explore. Following is an example of the questions I use to help them. I posed them to you in the last column, and here are the answers a few of you came up with:

1. **Why don't deer and many other animals bed down continuously in the same lays?**

Jeff Gottlieb offered several good several good possibilities – "because they change what they are eating and bed closer to it...because they sleep more comfortably on fresh, springy insulative materials... because they modify their territories and how they use them when others of their species move into the area, or leave it vacant." Richard A. West added a couple more – "Not all trees bear fruit at the same time, so game has to cover a much broader area searching for food sources... also being disturbed can spook animals and make them vacate an area."

Tamarack's comment: Both Richard and Jeff came up with likely motivators for changing bedding sites. Another is parasites; if animals reused their lays they would keep reinfesting themselves. The same is true of nest and den sites. Most birds build new nests every year, and some have multiple nest sites that they alternately use. Bears will do the same; one Black Bear neighbor of mine used his winter den behind my lodge only about every three years.

2. **Some trees such as Balsam Fir (Abies balsamea) have pitch boils on the surface of their bark. What are the reasons for these?**

Even though it's not my intent, every once in a while I'll pose a question that stumps just about everyone, and it looks like I've done it again with this one. Richard West came close with his speculation that the pitch boils have something to do with injury to the tree, perhaps caused by woodpeckers. Roughly half of mature Balsam Firs have rotten cores, which are infected (along with the sweet sapwood) by quite an array of succulent wood-boring insects. It takes the Crow-sized Pileated Woodpecker only a couple minutes to chisel deep into the core of a Balsam to get a succulent grub. You should see the chips fly with an inspired Pileated at

work! My theory is that the numerous pitch boils of a healthy tree repel woodpeckers, who do not like to get pitch (which often squirts out when the boils are ruptured) on their feathers.

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Bonus question – Why don't young Balsam Firs have pitch boils?

mailto:nedrod@yahoo.comThis turned out to be another stumper and yet Willow Brook gave it a try -- "The resin boils provide an energy reserve. Young trees are using their energy for growth so don't accumulate reserves." The pitch does have nutritional value, so Willow Brook's idea may hold water. Another reason is that young Balsams are seldom infected with insects, so have no need for pitch boils.

Thanks Jeff, Richard and Willow Brook for sending in your responses. Following are two new questions; have some fun with them and send me your answers. In the next column I'll include as many of your answers as space allows. This isn't a test, so don't worry about whether or not your answers are right. Whatever you come up with, you win, because you have helped reawaken your natural ability to question.

New Questions:

1. **Why do Snowshoe Hares and some other small animals often sit tight for a day or so after a new snow?**
2. **Why does a Pine-Oak forest tend to have acid, sterile soil, while the soil of a Maple-Basswood forest is sweet and rich?**

Please send your answers to me at tamarack@teachingdrum.orgmailto:tdrums2@newnorth.net or c/o Teaching Drum Outdoor School, 7124 Military Road, Three Lakes, WI 54562