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Autumn ushers in fading daylight, falling leaves, a chill to the air and the smell of wood smoke on frosty mornings. And so starts our preparation for the coming winter. We clean out vents and chimneys, - stock the woodpile, can the garden's bounty, and ensure our snow blower is ready. Some of us get a flu vaccine. Our wildlife neighbours are also busy preparing for winter – a serious task, considering their very survival hangs on their readiness.

The tiny eastern chipmunk has been busy since spring, preparing for winter by “scatter hoarding.” It stashes seeds, bulbs, fruits, fungi, and nuts in various places throughout its territory. Food is then relocated to one of many interconnecting storage chambers within the chipmunk's underground nest. Expanding cheek pouches in its mouth function like grocery bags, enabling the chipmunk to carry lots of food in one trip. Hoarding helps ensure ample nourishment throughout winter, when forage is depleted. Since the chipmunk doesn't store fat, it is not a true hibernator. It rouses from periods of torpor to eat from its stocked larder before curling up and going back to sleep.

Sometimes preparing for winter means escaping it entirely. The tiny ruby-throated hummingbird packs it in early or risks starvation. It retreats all the way back to Central America (between southern Mexico and northern Panama) -- an astounding biannual migration! With falling temperatures, the nectar and insects it relies on for survival are no longer a reliable food source. A handful of ruby-throated hummingbirds choose to migrate only as far as the Gulf Coast. Perhaps they are too old or never gained the layer of fat necessary to fuel them along the challenging trans-gulf journey. Another small population overwinters along the Outer Banks of North Carolina. The birds that opt to stay behind are at the mercy of the winter. In very cold years, many will die. Tip: leave your nectar feeder up for 2 weeks after you see the last bird to help stragglers fuel up along their journey.

From mid-summer through autumn, the black bear becomes increasingly active as it forages and hunts for food. In a process known as “*hyperphagia*,” it eats and drinks constantly in an effort to gain the weight necessary to sustain it through winter hibernation. The bear may take in up to 20,000 calories per day, as it devours carb-heavy berries, meat, and carrion. Eventually, it adds a hefty layer of body fat that more than doubles the insulation value of its fur alone. A typical hibernation den is located inside a hollow log, under the root mass of a tree or in a rock crevice or cave. The bear doesn't sleep through the entire winter, but has periods of wakefulness. Body temperature, heart and respiratory rates are lower; and yet, it is believed that the black bear burns around 4,000 calories a day and will lose 20-30 percent of its body weight by spring. A lactating mother bear can lose up to 40 percent (cubs are born in the den over the winter).

In autumn, the masked wood frog buries itself under leaf litter in the forest. There it enters a state of “suspended animation” for months: its heart stops beating, the kidneys stop functioning and respiration ceases. It literally freezes from the outside in. Remarkably, 65 percent of the water in the frog's body can freeze, and yet it can survive. This incredible feat is possible thanks to glucose-based antifreeze in the frog's bloodstream which prevent its cells from drying out. Nature is amazing!

Margie is a self-proclaimed nature nerd with a passion for all things finned, furred and feathered...even the creepy-crawly-scaly kinds. She's summered on Wolfe Lake since childhood and loves sharing what she learns about our wild things.