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Gazing outside at the bare landscape, you might wonder if the wild animals can find enough to eat to see them through another long winter. After all, not every creature migrates or hibernates. Winter can be a difficult season for animals to endure, and finding adequate food is crucial for their survival. How do they do it?

The tiny black-capped chickadee has the memory of an elephant, thanks to its hippocampus – the part of the brain responsible for memory. During fall and winter, the chickadee's hippocampus actually expands, helping it to recall where it stashed food over the warmer months. In winter, its diet is about half seeds, berries and other plant matter, and half protein sources, like insects, spiders and bits of meat pulled from frozen carrion. Chickadees with access to black oil sunflower seeds and suet from backyard feeders have

a significantly higher winter survival rate than those that do not; so you can give these lively little birds a boost by keeping your feeders full.

The beaver not only stays put in the winter – it remains active throughout the cold season and swims around under the ice. Among other neat winter adaptations, the beaver's tail helps to regulate heat and store fat. But what does it eat once the greenery is all gone? The beaver switches to a winter menu that includes the buds and twigs of its favourite trees and shrubs like willow, poplar, alder and birch. It eats only the outer layers of the bark, not the wood itself. Its need to chew continues throughout the winter months, so you may find fresh signs of a gnawed branch or tree trunk during a hike along a frozen lake or pond.

The red fox, one of Canada's most widespread mammals, is well-suited for cold weather with its luxurious fur coat; but like many other animals, it needs to adapt its diet as the seasons turn. Goodbye to the mixed summer diet of birds, crayfish, insects, fruit and grasses. Small mammals, such as mice, voles, squirrels and rabbits, fill its tummy during the winter. Super sharp senses enable the fox to detect the slightest movement or sound, even the flick of a rabbit's ear or the squeak of a mouse as far away as the length of a football field. The fox will continue hunting even when it is sated. It caches uneaten food under the snow to revisit when it is hungry or when prey is scarce.

The white-tailed deer manages to endure on a low quality diet throughout the winter months. It browses on woody twigs, stems and buds of deciduous trees and shrubs, as well as conifer greens. Optimally, there will be a broad selection of browse available: assorted maple varieties, dogwood, birch, red oak, cherry, white pine, cedar and hemlock. The deer supplements this seasonal forage with higher calorie foods when available, including nuts, fruits and mushrooms. Along with other winter survival behaviours, such as hunkering down and becoming less active, the ability to subsist on a stripped-down diet helps the white-tailed deer tough out the harsh months.

The toothy northern pike remains robust and active under the lake ice. As winter progresses, it often leaves the weedy haunts of spring and summer to follow high-protein forage fish out to deeper water. It ambushes and eats white suckers, chubs, ciscoes, perch and whitefish, as well as game fish. Toward the end of winter, it will begin moving shallow again. When food sources are scarce, the northern pike may practice cannibalism.

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.