

Spiders on the move

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It's Easter Monday, 6 am. I'm off call, and it's time to take Nathan, the medical student to whom I am a preceptor, into the wilderness. We need the early start before the crust on the snow softens with the heat of the day. Nathan has become adept at "crust skiing" on our daily early-morning ski excursions to Flatbed Falls before work, usually after we have warmed up with 40 lengths in the community swimming pool.

Today's longer trip is a continuation of the plan to sell him on how wonderful being a rural family doctor can be. We head for the wide valley that is the headwaters of Flatbed Creek about 45 minutes from town, and don our cross-country skis. It is amazing how quickly we are in true wilderness. Conditions are idyllic for crust skiing, and soon we have covered 12 km.

I am lapping up the distant mountain scenery, but Nathan is focusing on things nearby. He stops me and asks, "Have you seen the spiders?" I look down, and realize that each little dark brown blob on the snow that I have been skiing past for the last while is a spider, just under an inch long.

Remarkably, these spiders seem to be more or less evenly spaced, about

5 m apart, and they have been present for the past kilometre. The snow-covered floor of the flat valley is about 75 m wide. I do the math: the density seems to be consistent, and that means 3000 spiders! I take a macro photo and watch a spider move painfully slowly in the 1°C temperature.

We follow this up with a quick snowshoe trip to the Shipyard, a favourite mountain destination with its superb rock scenery, and onto the prow of the giant rock outcrop that we know as the Titanic (the most sensational snowshoeing experience on the planet). Then we return to town and post our spider questions to the northern BC naturalist groups, asking if anyone can tell us what phenomenon we have witnessed. A few answers come in: these are probably Wolf spiders, and what we have noted is indeed unusual. Not surprisingly, climate change is offered as an explanation. We are asked by a spider expert in northern British Columbia to return and collect some spider specimens for scientific research.

I manage to deliver Nathan to the medical clinic just in time for the afternoon clinic, where he will work with my colleague in seeing the day's urgent cases. The spiders have made our day, but it is just another one of many superb days in our remote northern community.

I can see that Nathan embraces the concept of longitudinal care and appreciates the rewards and challenges of rural family medicine. He asks me why there aren't hundreds of Canadian doctors lining up to work in places like Tumbler Ridge. My answer is short and to the point: "I don't know. It is one of the great mysteries of existence ... just like the spiders."

Competing interests: None declared.

