

## Folklore Forecasting

### AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

People always are asking me about what I think of the Farmer's Almanac forecast for the coming year. Or maybe what the bands of color on the Woolly Bear are saying about the weather. Perhaps it's the activity of the squirrels or one of a hundred other things that people will use to try to forecast an upcoming winter or any season. Here's my response to all of it. It doesn't mean a thing about what the upcoming season it going to be!

Yeah, I'm a bit of a curmudgeon when it comes to these kinds of things. Don't really believe any of those. The Farmer's Almanac, well, I just don't have a lot of faith in their secret formula for forecasting the weather. Study after study has basically said they are no more accurate than the National Weather Service or Climate Prediction Center. But feel free to buy them every year and put your faith in them.

Here's the bottom line that I am always going back to when it comes to trying to use natural signs to predict a coming winter. Insects, animals and plants react to what has been, not to what is going to be, and I can prove it. Plants, insects, animals have no ability to do anything other than react to what we have right now.

It has been said, "Squirrels gathering nuts in a flurry, will cause snow to gather in a hurry." Let's examine squirrel behavior for this one. As the daylength becomes less and less in the fall a squirrel's metabolism changes and they do start gathering nuts and caching them or burying them wherever. They sense something is changing and they need to store food. One could say that over the millions of years those squirrels that didn't exhibit this behavior died from starvation during the winter. Squirrels are very busy this year collecting walnuts and acorns because the trees bore heavily this year. That was because we had good conditions late last summer to produce lots of flowers and good conditions this spring to pollinate, set seed and grow. They are busy gathering nuts because the past 12 months were excellent for nut production. They will continue to gather nuts until there are no more left to gather. That is all.

Now the Woolly Bear caterpillar. The Woolly Bear is one of a group of species known as Saltmarsh Caterpillars or Tiger Moths. There are many different species ranging from all yellow caterpillars to all black caterpillars. The width of the Woolly Bear's color bands comes down to two major factors: genetics and the environment that the caterpillar was living in as it grew. It's all about what has been and nothing to do with what is going to be. It's ability to prognosticate the coming winter is absolutely zero. Creatures respond to what has been and what is, not what is going to be.

Granted, many animals and insect will react a certain way when a storm is imminent. It is generally believed that they are very sensitive to the abrupt changes in barometric pressure. But that is something minutes to hours away, not months. Numerous critters have been observed reacting "differently" just before an earthquake. They may very well be sensing miniscule vibrations that we don't notice. Again, that is merely being aware of what is happening around them at this time, probably because they aren't staring at their cell phone. Something we humans could certainly learn from!

Folklore is fun to hear about. Occasionally it is even right. But relying on it for a long range weather predictor is just setting yourself up for disaster. Always be prepared for any kind of winter weather and then it won't matter what the Woolly Bear says!