



DECEMBER PHENOLOGY

A reflective look at 2012

by Jim Gilbert, Naturalist

December's beauty is the icing on the year's layered cake. Fresh flakes of snow and ice glisten in the early-setting sun, while holiday lights bring a sense of warmth to ever-cooler temperatures. Listed below are a few observations from a year ago in the Twin Cities Metro area, Waconia and areas beyond when indicated. These events can be used to anticipate upcoming happenings and will help you compare 2013 with last year.

December 1 † An estimated 2,000 Common Mergansers gather in Smith's Bay, Lake Minnetonka. Pine Siskins descend in large numbers on area feeding stations.

December 2 † With snowmaking equipment in use, many Minnesota ski areas open runs for skiing and snowboarding.

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On cold mornings, a beautiful steamy fog rises from open water on rivers and lakes. An unlikely fishing boat is out on Lake Waconia; the lake is wide open.



December 9 † It's the first big snowfall of the season. From Marshall to the Twin Cities and western Wisconsin, 8-17 inches fall.

December 10 † Today's the freeze-up date for White Bear Lake, Lotus Lake and Lake Waconia in Carver County, Green Lake at Spicer, Mille Lacs Lake, and Fish Hook Lake at Park Rapids.

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December 13 † More people in the Twin Cities are seeing Pine Siskins and Common Redpolls at their feeding stations. A few Eastern Bluebirds linger at heated birdbaths.

December 15 † Over 7,000 Common Mergansers and 23 Bald Eagles are tallied from the Excelsior Christmas Bird Count. On the 51st annual Willmar area Christmas Bird Count, 31 people record 785 Common Redpolls, 174 American Robins, 90 Ring-necked Pheasants, and 63 Northern Cardinals. Despite steady rain, Duluth area count participants spy a total of 57 species, including 8 Glaucous Gulls, 3 Iceland Gulls and 2 Snowy Owls.

December 16 † Mature white-tailed deer bucks begin dropping their antlers. Deer are browsers; each winter day they eat about 5 pounds of food for every 100 pounds of body weight. Their current diet consists of thin twigs of sugar maples, basswoods, red-osier dogwoods, northern white cedars, and other woody plants.

DEC. 19 Screech Owls, gray squirrels and other animals take over nesting boxes for winter shelter.



December 22 † Today's the freeze-up date for Lake Minnetonka.

December 23 † Pairs of Great Horned Owls hoot duets. They're probably establishing nesting territories—or at least keeping in touch!

December 25 † Forty years of statistics tell us there is a 92% chance of a white Christmas with one inch or more snow in International Falls, and 72% chance in the Twin Cities. This year we have a snow cover of about 3 inches.

DEC. 19 Overwintering Mourning Doves, common to southern Minnesota feeding stations, prefer to eat white millet and other seeds scattered on the ground in protected spots.



December 31 † Lake Waconia is covered with an average of 12 inches of ice. Walleyes, sunfish and crappies are biting.