



DECEMBER PHENOLOGY

A reflective look at 2015

by Jim Gilbert, Naturalist

With new snow and ice, and maybe a surprise white frost, December can provide some of the year's most dramatic landscapes. Sunshine is at a minimum for the year, and the coldest part of the month is usually the last week. Listed below are some notes from a year ago in the Twin Cities Metro area and areas beyond when indicated. These events can be used to help you compare 2016 with last year.

December 1 * Because of warmer than normal temperatures, ice safety is a huge issue this season. Be sure to warn children about the dangers of thin ice. It takes at least 4 inches of new solid ice in contact with still freshwater for safe walking, skating and ice fishing.

Ring-necked Pheasants feed in corn stubble fields. Snowy Owls turn up in scattered spots around MN; one was spotted today at MSP Int'l Airport.



Airport, and -1°F at Bemidji. It's the freeze-up date for Lake Waconia, Cannon Lake at Faribault, and Lake Bemidji. On the Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge Christmas Bird Count, 40 counters observed 3,254 birds, including: 48 species, 510 Blue Jays, 448 Trumpeter Swans, 18 Sandhill Cranes, and 1 Great Blue Heron.

December 21 * A brown landscape dominates—we need snow! The solstice today marks the first day of astronomical winter. We experience the longest night and shortest daylight period, and the sunlight casts the longest shadows of the year.

December 9 * Today's high is 47°F. A couple of Twin Cities area golf courses are open, a fishing boat is out on Lake Waconia, and American Robins are calling and singing.

December 10 * The Twin Cities is having above normal temperatures each day so far in December. American Tree Sparrows, Dark-eyed Juncos and Northern Cardinals arrive at feeding stations about a half-hour before sunrise, and stay that long after sunset. The number of Mourning Doves wintering in southern MN over the last 20 years continues to rise.

December 13 * The mild El Niño-influenced weather is keeping a good share of MN lakes ice-free at this time. Flying squirrels come nightly to wildlife feeding stations in areas with mature trees, including urban areas such as Hopkins, Bloomington and St. Paul. They typically arrive about 5 p.m. or a bit later at this time of year to dine on suet, sunflower and other seeds. Floodlights do not scare these small squirrels.

December 16 * The first half of December is nearly +14°F warmer than average in the Twin Cities. Many lakes in southern MN that froze over in late November are wide open again.

December 19 * The low temperature is 8°F at MSP Int'l

Northern Cardinals are non-migrants. Studies show that they not only mate for life but remain together the entire year. Winterberry, highbush cranberry and sumac shrubs, plus many varieties of crabapple trees provide colorful fruit for wildlife.



December 25 * It's a brown Christmas! Forty years of records reveal that there's a 72% chance of a white Christmas, with an inch or more of snow, in the Twin Cities. Today is the freeze-up for Mille Lacs Lake (freeze-up was Nov. 20 in 2014).

December 30 * About 20 bird species come to southern MN feeding stations; the largest being Trumpeter Swans and Wild Turkeys, and the smallest being American Goldfinches, Black-capped Chickadees and Brown Creepers.

December 31 * Official freeze-up date for Lake Minnetonka, and both Lake Calhoun and Lake Harriet in Minneapolis. December ended up being the warmest on record in Minnesota.

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2

DEC.

24