

DECEMBER PHENOLOGY

A reflective look at 2014

by Jim Gilbert, Naturalist

Darkness dominates in December as sunshine diminishes in the weeks leading up to the winter solstice on the 22nd of this month. New snow, frost and ice provide for dramatic landscapes. 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 2015 with last year.

December 1 * Today starts meteorological winter and is the freeze-up date for Lake Harriet in Minneapolis. Both red and gray squirrels eat seeds that still cling to box elder trees.

December 3 * It's the freeze-up date for Grindstone Lake, a deep lake near Sandstone.

Flying squirrels visit feeding stations soon after sunset; they are fond of sunflower seeds, peanuts and peanut butter.



December 6 * Blue jays, Black-capped Chickadees, Mourning Doves, and more come to heated birdbaths for a drink. Ring-necked Pheasants feed in corn stubble fields.

December 9 * Often between 50 and 75 wintering Bald Eagles collect in the Wabasha/Reads Landing area of the Mississippi River where there is open water.

December 13 * Today's high is 51°F. Our snow cover is gone and water covers lake and pond ice. Mosses become lush green, and honey bees are out on cleansing flights.

December 15 * For the third consecutive day we experience 50°F. Chickadees, White-breasted Nuthatches, Dark-eyed Juncos and others find their way through the fog and rain to visit feeding stations.

December 16 * Mature white-tailed deer bucks begin dropping their antlers throughout mid-December. Deer eat about 5 pounds of food for every 100 pounds of weight each winter day. Now they're browsing thin twigs of sugar maples, basswoods, red-osier dogwoods, northern white cedars, and other woody plants.

December 17 * Back to the cold! With temperatures in the

teens and single digits, ice sheets on lakes audibly crack, thunder and rumble. These eerie sounds remind us to respect the ice.

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Screech Owls often roost in Wood Duck houses. Gray squirrels and other animals also use these nesting boxes for winter shelter.



December 20 * The Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge Christmas Bird Count records 38 species, including a Golden Eagle, Common Redpolls and Pine Siskins.

December 21 * Astronomical winter begins today in the northern hemisphere. December sunlight casts the longest shadows of the year, and today is the long shadow peak.

December 22 * Pairs of Great Horned Owls hoot duets, probably to establish nesting territories—or at least to keep in touch.

December 25 * 40 years of statistics tell us there's a 92% chance of a white Christmas with one inch of snow or more in International Falls, and a 72% chance of snow cover in the Twin Cities. This year we have a brown Christmas over the Twin Cities and most of MN.

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Winter wonderland! From yesterday into today over 6 in. of snow falls on the greater Twin Cities area. Before and during snowfalls there's a feeding frenzy among many birds at feeding stations.



December 30 * Beautiful frost patterns paint windowpanes this minus 10°F morning.

December 31 * Lake Waconia ice is about 8 to 11 in. thick; crappies, sunfish and walleyes are biting.