

December

Naturalist Jim Gilbert's observations from this time last year, plus a seasonal checklist of backyard tasks.

PHENOLOGY & CHECKLIST

DEC

01

High temperature of 39°F. I hear a **Northern Cardinal** in full song.

DEC

02



Flying squirrels come to many feeding stations after dark; they like suet, peanut butter, peanuts, and sunflower seeds. A spotlight aimed on the feeder will not keep these small squirrels away. A very few eastern chipmunks are still active above ground, collecting food.

DEC

06

Flocks of migrating **Tundra Swans** continue to be fly SE over the Twin Cities. In Minneapolis, about 1,800 **Ring-billed** and **Herring Gulls** visit Lake Calhoun, and 1,200 stop over on Lake Harriet. Lake Benton in Lincoln County and Wells Lake at Faribault freezes over.

DEC

07



Northern Cardinals often arrive at feeders close to 25 minutes before sunrise. **Dark-eyed Juncos** are numerous at many feeding stations where they like cracked corn or millet seeds on low tray feeders or scattered on the ground.

DEC

09

Today is the freeze-up date for Lake Waconia and Lotus Lake in Carver County, French Lake near Faribault, Wolf Lake near Finland, and Lake Itasca in Itasca State Park.

DEC

11

The 7 inches of new snow on evergreen boughs is beautiful. **Blue Jays**, **Black-capped Chickadees** and red squirrels are among the wildlife drinking from a heated birdbath.

DEC

13

Today is the freeze-up date for Mille Lacs Lake, Leech Lake, Lake Vermilion, and Lake of the Woods. Always remember, it takes at least 4 inches of new solid ice in contact with stationary water for safe walking on, skating and ice fishing.

DEC

15

Bald Eagles hunt fish where open water prevails, like along the Mississippi River in SE Minnesota. It's the official freeze-up date for Lake Minnetonka, and for both Lake Calhoun and Lake Harriet in Minneapolis, and Little McDonald Lake near Perham.

DEC

16

Just before 8 am (7°F) I hear a **White-breasted Nuthatch's** "whi,whi,whi..." spring song, and a **Black-capped Chickadee's** whistled "fee-fee" song. They're two sounds of nature I haven't heard for a while.



- ☐ Use a **heated birdbath** or **heated insert** to provide fresh water throughout the winter.



- ☐ Prevent bill sweeping, a seed-scattering behavior, by using a large **Wild Bird Feast seed cylinder** in a **covered Vista Dome feeder**.
- ☐ Add a **Weather Guard** to your **Squirrel Buster Plus** to keep seed drier.
- ☐ Remove lime deposits from your **heated birdbath** by filling it with 50% water and 50% white vinegar. Cover it with a plastic bag for 30 minutes, scrub then rinse.
- ☐ Darkness can extend for 15 hours. Spend a few minutes in the daylight filling your feeders and watching the birds.
- ☐ Bald Eagles fish the open waters of the Mississippi and around the marinas on area lakes.
- ☐ Attract ground-feeding Dark-eyed Juncos, American Tree Sparrows and Mourning Doves by casting **Finches' Choice** on the ground beneath bird feeders.
- ☐ Flocks of Cedar Waxwings feed on fruits of junipers, mountain ash and crabapple trees and are attracted to the open water in a **heated birdbath**.

December

PHENOLOGY & CHECKLIST

(Continued from front)

DEC

17

Today marks the start of the 117th annual Audubon Christmas Bird Counts, which continue into the first week of January. Some highlights from the 65th annual Rice County Count (including Faribault and Northfield areas) are 50 species and over 7,000 individual birds observed, including: 689 **Mallard Ducks**, 590 **Canada Geese**, 673 **Dark-eyed Juncos**, 338 **Black-capped Chickadees**, 224 **Northern Cardinals**, 186 **Wild Turkeys**, 134 **Downy Woodpeckers**, 61 **Ring-necked Pheasants**, 28 **Bald Eagles**, 2 **Belted Kingfishers**, and 1 **Great Blue Heron**.

DEC

18

In the Twin Cities and Grand Marais the low is -20°F. International Falls, Hibbing and Redwood Falls all record -30°F. **Northern Cardinals** and at least a dozen other species are numerous and active at feeding stations.

DEC

19

The 31st annual Christmas Bird Count for the Sax-Zim area near Cotton in St. Louis County results in 31 species tallied by 13 observers. Highlights: 81 **Common Ravens**, 66 **White-winged Crossbills**, 62 **Pine Grosbeaks**, 49 **American Crows**, 46 **Red-breasted Nuthatches**, 25 **Ruffed Grouse**, 10 **Bald Eagles**, 3 **Northern Goshawks**, and 1 **Great Gray Owl**.

DEC

21

High of 41°F and honeybees out on cleansing flights on this December solstice and first day of astronomical winter.

DEC

23

A **Downy Woodpecker** drums on a dead tree to announce his territory. Rain and a half-inch of wet snow fall. High of 37°F. First-of-the-season **Common Redpolls** arrive at a feeding station in Afton.



DEC

25

Rain begins falling at noon and continues into the evening. Forty years of records reveal that there is a 92% chance of a white Christmas in International Falls, with one or more inches of snow, and a 72% chance in the Twin Cities.

DEC

27

Around 4 pm, long rivers of **American Crows** fly toward their communal roosting sites.

DEC

28

After sunset, courting pairs of **Great Horned Owls** hoot back and forth.

DEC

30

In Grand Marais, **American Robins**, **Cedar Waxwings** and **Bohemian Waxwings** were seen feeding on native mountain ash fruit. In Faribault, 17 bird species including 10 **Mourning Doves**, a **Brown Creeper** and a **Northern Flicker** come to one feeding station.

DEC

31

There are just 2 inches of crusty snow left. Statewide, 2016 was the third warmest and second wettest year on record.

❑ Raccoons are slumbering but are not true hibernators. When nighttime temps are 20°F or above they may be out foraging. Use a **baffle** to keep them from climbing bird feeder poles.

❑ Goldfinches will visit feeders year round. Jostle feeders to release clumped or frozen seed.

❑ Listen for Great-horned Owl pairs hooting a duet back and forth.

❑ Half hours before sunrise and after sunset are busy times at feeders. Look for cardinals, Dark-eyed Juncos and American Tree Sparrows.

❑ Flying Squirrels may visit nightly. Look for them on **bird feeders**, especially around 5 pm.

❑ Participate in the Christmas Bird Count: www.audubon.org/conservation/science/christmas-bird-count.

❑ Over-wintering robins visit **heated birdbaths** and eat the fruit of high bush cranberry shrubs, bittersweet vines and crabapple trees. Use a **tray feeder** near the birdbath to feed robins **mealworms** and **Berry Nutty**.

