

# WALK ON THE WILDSIDE

The Minnesota Conservation Federation

December 2014

## Some animals disappear during the winter

For anyone who watches or feeds backyard wildlife, it can seem like many of the animals that were common summer visitors completely disappear during the winter.

Many of Minnesota's mammals either hibernate for the entire winter or retreat during especially cold periods to survive.

Here's where they go:

- Hibernation is most commonly associated with the black bear, which spends the entire winter in its den.

Minnesota's black bears usually enter their dens in October. By November they are deep into hibernation. Their heart rate drops to as few as eight beats per minute and their breathing slows to one breath per 45 seconds.

Black bears go the entire winter without eating, drinking or urinating, but mother black bears give birth to their cubs, while they are hibernating. The cubs feed on their mother's milk to survive the winter.

- In contrast, chipmunks also



disappear during the winter months, but they do not go into complete hibernation. They wake occasionally to feed on the stores of food in their burrows.

Other animals like the squirrel and raccoon may disappear for days or weeks during the winter, but may emerge during periods of warmer weather.

- Gray or fox squirrels retreat to their nests during severe cold snaps. They may go days without feeding, but need to emerge fairly frequently to look for food.

- Red squirrels store food in underground burrows and may nest underground or in a tree during the winter. Red squirrels will make tunnels beneath the snow, which they use to move between

food sources and avoid the cold weather.

- Raccoons also stay in their dens during extremely cold weather, but do not hibernate. They may remain in a sleepy dormancy for weeks or even a whole month, living off their fat reserves, before going out to look for food when temperatures warm.

Although raccoons are typically nocturnal, during the winter they are more likely to come out during the day in the winter, when the temperatures are warmest.

- Like the raccoon, the striped skunk spends much of the winter in its den, living off its fat reserves. During warmer periods, especially when the thermometer approaches 32 degrees, it will emerge to forage for food.

- The opossum, which is not native to Minnesota, does not hibernate, but spends most of the winter in its den, living on its fat reserves. Opossums are not well-suited to cold weather. They do not grow winter fur and commonly suffer frostbite on their ears or tail.

# Winter is a great time to explore the stars

**D**uring the winter, the days are short and the nights are long, which means there is plenty of time to explore the night skies.

December 21 is the winter solstice or the shortest day of the year. In Minnesota and the rest of the Northern Hemisphere, the winter solstice is the time at which we are tilted to our farthest point from the sun. After December 21, we begin moving closer to the sun and our days slowly grow longer.

December and January are great times to watch the night sky, because the nights are longer and there are many things to see if we keep our eye on the sky.

Among the objects to watch are the planets. Venus, the brightest planet to the naked eye, is visible in the western sky throughout December.

Mars is visible in the southern sky right when the sun goes down. Look for it just west of due south, fairly high in the sky.

If you are willing to get up early in the morning, you can also see a bright Jupiter high in the southern sky.

Sky observers can spot Saturn by watching the eastern sky just



**Venus is the brightest planet to the naked eye. (NASA photo)**

after sunset. It is not as bright as Jupiter, but will be fairly easy to spot.

Neptune and Uranus are also present in the December sky, but are best seen with a telescope.

In addition to planets, some of the most famous constellations of stars are also visible during the months of December and January.

Orion the hunter is one of the largest constellations in the sky and it is also fairly easy to spot. The easiest way to find Orion is to look for three bright stars close together in a line. They make up Orion's belt. Beginning in December, Orion is visible during the evening.

Andromeda is one of largest and most impressive constellations

visible during the winter. It can be seen high in the northern sky during the evening.

The constellation Gemini or The Twins is clearly visible during December and January. The twins are the stars Pollux and Castor, which represent the heads of the twins. Gemini is located off the right shoulder of Orion. The best way to locate both planets and stars in the night sky is to use a map. Numerous Web sites are available that

offer downloads of maps to kids for free. The maps allow you to see the shape of constellations and better locate them.

***Maps for kids:** Among the best websites for finding information about the night sky is Kids Astronomy, located at <http://www.kidsastronomy.com/astroskymap/constellations.htm>. It provides a free, printable map that shows the night sky on any night of the year. It's a great tool for exploring the stars and planets from your backyard.*

*The My Kids Adventures website offers a great way for parents and kids to learn about the night sky together. Explore this site with your mom or dad. It offers lots of great information and activities to*

# State's fishers made a dramatic comeback

One of most dramatic comeback stories among Minnesota's mammals is that of the fisher.

Nearly trapped to extinction in the early 20th Century, the fisher's population rebounded after receiving protection from the state. However, the fisher's numbers did not just recover, they expanded, pushing the furbearer well beyond its original range.

Minnesota closed trapping for fishers in 1927 and did not have another season until 1977. The astounding comeback spurred the opening of the season.

In the early part of this century, fishers were found only near the Canadian border in Minnesota. Today, they range as far south as Cambridge and Forest Lake, just north of the Twin Cities, but that is about as far south as they are expected to move. The fisher has also ranged as far west as the



North Dakota border.

The fisher's comeback in Minnesota is mirrored in Wisconsin and Michigan. Both states experienced a resurgence in fisher numbers and chose to open trapping seasons.

The fisher's successful comeback is credited to a number of factors, but the extended closure of the season proved the most beneficial. Another factor was a high prey population.

Minnesota's fisher population is estimated at more than 10,000 and that number keeps growing.

The best areas to find fishers

are from Pine and Aitkin counties north, but if you go looking for them, your chances of seeing one are very low. They are solitary animals that are most active at night. They will venture out during the day, but even then, they are rarely seen. You have

a better chance of seeing fisher tracks, especially in the snow.

Fishers typically range between a seven and 10 square mile area in forest areas. They den in hollow trees, abandoned beaver lodges, rock crevices, or old porcupine dens.

Fishers belong to the weasel family and look like a very large mink. An average male weighs between 10 and 14 pounds, while a female is about half that size.

Fishers typically feed on small rodents like snowshoe hares, mice, and squirrels, but also eat raccoons, porcupines, birds and carri-

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## Cattails play an important role in state's ecosystem

Anyone who has spent any time around ponds, marshes, lakes or rivers in Minnesota is familiar with the cattail. It grows in shallow water along the shorelines and is easily recognized by its fuzzy brown top of the plant.

The cattail plays many important roles in the aquatic ecosystem. One of its most important

roles is to act as a natural buffer along the shoreline. Its thick network of roots help stabilize the banks of lakes, marshes and rivers. The cattail also stops waves from pounding the shoreline, which prevents erosion.

Numerous wildlife depend directly on the cattail. Waterfowl, shore birds and others use the thick

cattail stands as nesting areas, which are hidden from predators.

Muskrats use cattails to build their winter lodges and as a source of food. Fish, such as the northern pike spawn in the cattails, giving the eggs and young protection.

Cattails play such an important role in our state's aquatic ecosystem, the state Department of Natu-

# Wintergreen remains green during the winter

Evergreens are often thought of as trees like the pine or spruce, but some other native Minnesota plants also remain green in winter.

One example is the wintergreen. As its name implies, this tiny plant's leaves remain green all winter.

The wintergreen prefers dry forest ground and often grows in the same areas where blueberries are found.

Even if you are looking for wintergreen, it is often difficult to spot, because the plant is so small.



**Wintergreen berries stay on the plant all winter.**

It typically is five inches or less in height and its leaves are less than one inch in diameter.

The wintergreen's red fruit stays on the plant all winter and

provides food for birds and small mammals. The berries are edible for humans, but have a strong taste that mellows during the winter.

In addition to remaining green during the winter, the wintergreen has other unique qualities. The oil of the plant contains a chemical called methyl salicylate, which has anti-inflammatory properties and is closely related to aspirin. Wintergreen oil has long been used in topical pain relievers. Native Americans chewed the leaves of the plant and used them to treat

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# Balsam fir is a December favorite for the holidays

Throughout much of the year, the balsam fir does not receive any more attention than any of Minnesota's other native trees, but in December, it is the most popular tree in the state.

For hundreds of years, the balsam fir has served as the traditional Christmas tree, because of its

uniform shape, scent and ability to retain its color after it has been cut.

In the wild, the balsam fir is found mainly in the northern portion of Minnesota, although it grows elsewhere, most notably, the southeast corner of the state.

The balsam fir prefers damp

soil and cool temperatures, and it grows well in shady conditions.

A balsam fir can live more than 100 years and can grow to 60 feet in height.

One way to distinguish the balsam fir from other evergreen trees is to look at the cones. The balsam fir has large purplish cones that

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