

Wild Times At Pine Hill Park

Spring 2018 Summary

By Tom Estill

The end of Spring 2018 found the forest floor covered in about 8 inches of snow from 2 Nor'easters which came through the area in late March. Both Rocky and Muddy ponds were completely frozen over, and in the forest you could find the usual winter resident birds including black-capped chickadees, golden-crowned kinglets, brown creepers, and white-breasted nuthatches. A few birds, including singing tufted titmouse and drumming hairy woodpeckers were beginning to show signs of territorial behavior. Barred owls could also be heard "hooting".

On March 25th, I was terribly disappointed to find the Osprey nest was no longer at the top of the power pole at the northwest end of Muddy Pond. It was a large nest, and either it was blown off the pole by the recent big Nor'easters, or it was taken down by the power company. There were high hopes the osprey would successfully nest there this year.

The last day of March was a gorgeous day with temps. in the forties, and most of the snow gone from the forest floor. Streams were flowing, many small insects could be seen flying about, and a mourning cloak butterfly was seen flying about in the chestnut tree areas just above the quarry. I suppose those open areas provide lots of sunlight for the newly emerged butterflies, with their dark wings absorbing lots of energy, but I do wonder why every EARLY spring I ALWAYS see mourning cloak butterflies in that same area. Eastern newts were seen at Rocky Pond, and some of the perimeter of both Rocky and Muddy ponds were now open water. Cardinals were singing near the trailhead and a great blue heron and hooded mergansers were seen at Muddy Pond. I came across a most beautiful ground beetle, *Carabus serratus*, with its iridescent, violet colored elytra edge. Eastern chipmunks were also scurrying about.

On April 8th, the forest floor was once again covered in 1 inch of snow from a recent storm. Rocky and Muddy ponds were once again completely frozen over. On April 13th, a Parks and Rec. night hike occurred, but little was heard or seen with the exception of a few squirrels. The perimeter of Rocky Pond was open water, and spring peepers could be heard.

By April 21st, no snow could be found on the ground, both ponds had ice only in their centers, squirrels and chipmunks were a common sight, and for the first time, I saw a MUSKRAT at Muddy Pond, feeding on pond vegetation after climbing up onto the edge of the pond ice. Canada geese were seen at both ponds, along with wood ducks and mallards. A barred owl could be heard "hooting", ring-necked ducks could be seen at Muddy pond and a belted kingfisher was seen at Rocky Pond. A broad-winged hawk, turkey vulture, yellow-bellied sapsuckers and Eastern phoebe were also seen. Territorial behavior was being exhibited by many birds.

During the last week of April, a pair of Canada geese was seen in the same place where Canada geese set up a nest along the far shore of Rocky Pond last year. I wondered if they were the same pair. The big news was that a pair of Osprey was seen at the top of the power line pole where they had built a nest the previous year. Peepers and wood frogs were both calling, the ice was gone from the ponds, and the first wildflower of the season, Coltsfoot, was blooming.

On May 5th, migrants were flying through the area, with some staying to build nests. Red-eyed vireos, yellow-throated vireos, a sharp-shinned hawk, American redstart, least flycatcher, hermit thrush, and black-and-white warblers were seen for the first time. Most exciting of all was to see the Osprey pair, leaving the power line pole, and working on building up the old, abandoned, great blue heron nest on the east side of Muddy Pond. Lots of flying insects throughout the park, mostly bumblebees, and trout lily, barren strawberry, and wood anemone were all flowering. Beavers were also observed to have built a THIRD dam on Rocky Pond. Water level at that pond is now higher than it has been in a long time.

By May 11th, osprey were sitting on their nest, and birds, such as Audubon's warbler, and black-throated warbler were still migrating through the area, and a stunning scarlet tanager was seen for the first time. Wild oats and painted trillium were in flower. A few tent caterpillar nests were also seen, especially along the Carriage Trail. The chestnut trees finally "leafed out".

By mid-May, butterflies were becoming a common sight, gay wings, star flower and columbine were all flowering, and garter snakes were a common sight on warm days.

On May 28th, 50 button bush seedlings were planted along the south shore of Rocky Pond in an attempt to increase their numbers. Button bush flowers are beautiful, round flowers that produce seeds which are a valuable food source for waterfowl. The indigo buntings are once again nesting under the power lines on the Carriage Trail. I am always taken aback at the beauty of that bird, and the scarlet tanager. 70 milkweed seedlings were also planted near the old parking lot at Rocky Pond. The milkweeds will provide shelter, egg laying opportunities, and food for Monarch butterflies. The area is an official Monarch Waystation, and is maintained by local school children, who grow the plants from seeds they collect in the fall.

On March 30th, the gray treefrog, bullfrog, green frog, and American toad could all be heard calling at Rocky Pond. For the very first time at Pine Hill Park, I was able to see a gray treefrog up close as it was calling. I ever sooooo slowly crept up on the frog to get a good look. The first firefly of the season was seen in the evening.

On June 2nd, I observed black water snakes exhibiting mating behavior at Rocky Pond. Two males would coil around one another in a violent attempt to see which one would be able to mate with a nearby female.

On June 6th, 3 more American chestnuts were planted in the forest. The forest now has a total of 50 American chestnut trees growing in 5 different areas. The trees come from American chestnut tree stands in Wisconsin and Georgia which have been producing seeds for decades, and are surrounded by infected trees. It is believed they are naturally immune. We're trying to see if that's the case here at Pine Hill Park. The 3 trees that were planted this year are hybrid trees, containing Chinese and American chestnut DNA, the Chinese DNA providing the immunity to the Chestnut blight. Some of the trees are now over 5 ft. tall. I'm wondering if next year, they will flower????? The trees are watered, sprayed(organic), weeded, cleared of brush and debris, and fertilized throughout the year.

By mid-June, on a typical nature walk, you were more than likely to see buttercups, forget-me-nots, partridgeberry, yarrow, ox-eye daisy, cow vetch and red clover all in flower, a large number of birds including robins, scarlet tanager, indigo bunting, yellow-throated and red-eyed vireos, least flycatcher, yellow-bellied sapsucker, hairy woodpecker, chestnut-sided and Audubon's warblers, hermit thrush, veery, ovenbird, catbird, American redstart, American goldfinch, Eastern peewee, cardinal, Canada geese, and Osprey. Squirrels and chipmunks would be common, and cottontail rabbits and deer could be seen usually at dawn or dusk. Painted turtle, black water snakes, Eastern newts, red efts, garter snakes and green frogs could all be found near water.

That's it for this season. Enjoy your walks throughout the park, and please remember to stay on the trails.