

Wild Times At Pine Hill Park Fall, 2016 Summary

The first official day of fall found me taking a nice hike through the forest. Gray squirrels and Eastern chipmunks could be seen busily gathering nuts in preparation for the approaching winter, and Blue Jays, crows, white-breasted nuthatches, and northern flickers were a common sight. At Muddy Pond, I was surprised to hear a couple of Gray Tree Frogs calling back and forth to one another. The first of many to come Canada geese were resting at the pond along with a few wood ducks, a great blue heron, and kingfisher. Nearby a pileated woodpecker was high in a tree searching for insects and grubs beneath the tree bark.

On Sept. 24th, a large flock of robins was seen near the trailhead, undoubtedly on their way south for the winter. Catbirds, blue jays, black-capped chickadees, white-breasted nuthatches, northern flicker, hairy woodpeckers, gray squirrels and chipmunks were also seen. A “Lucky” tailless chipmunk was seen on the upper Giorgetti trail, a chipmunk I would see in the same area for weeks to come. Acorns were still falling from the oak trees. At Muddy Pond, Canada geese now numbered about 50.

The first week of Oct. found many robins still migrating south, and a loose association of tufted titmouse and hairy woodpeckers flying from tree to tree. A single yellow-rumped warbler was also seen near the trailhead.

I was very surprised to see a *spectacular* fall foliage season. I thought for sure, particularly because of the hot, DRY summer, that our fall foliage season would suffer. Was I wrong! Fall foliage was at maximum at Pine Hill Park around the beginning of the second week of Oct. this year. In mid-October, gray squirrels and Eastern chipmunks were still collecting falling acorns, more and more Canada geese were flying in and out of Muddy Pond, and a pair of hermit thrushes and American Goldfinch were seen.

During the last week of October, you could regularly see loose associations of black-capped chickadees, tufted titmouse, white-breasted nuthatches, and hairy woodpeckers. The beaver den on the easy shore of rocky pond continued to get larger and larger. A flock of myrtle warblers and a migrating red-tailed hawk were also seen. Canada geese at Muddy Pond now numbered in the hundreds. About the only trees left with leaves were the oaks and beech trees. The last flower I saw this year was the heart-leaved aster, also called the blue wood aster.

At the beginning of November, our winter birds were becoming increasingly difficult to find due to dwindling numbers. A few mallards could now be found along with just a few hundred Canada geese at Muddy Pond. The forest had become noticeably more quiet, but still had surprises in store for those who were patient and quiet. A brown creeper and red-bellied woodpecker were seen on Nov. 10th.

By mid-November, the forest had become so quiet, that even common winter birds were being hard to find. Numerous downed branches filled the waters adjacent to both beaver dens on Rocky Pond, and branches were being piled up on one of the beaver dens on Muddy Pond. About 200 Canada geese were seen at Muddy Pond on Nov. 19th.

The last week of November found the park covered with patches of snow, a couple hundred Canada geese at Muddy Pond, and the ponds beginning to ice over.

By the first week of December, the forest was covered with a couple inches of snow, and Rocky and Muddy Ponds were frozen over with about an inch of ice, with the exception of a couple small areas near the east shore beaver den. Crows were seen flying overhead, and it was hard to find any birds except an occasional hairy woodpecker, white-breasted nuthatch, and black-capped chickadee. No geese on frozen Muddy Pond.

On the last day of fall, the forest was once again very quiet, 2-3" of snow covered the ground, the packed-down trails were treacherous with ice, I did not see a single animal on my walk from the trailhead to Muddy Pond, and back, and the 2 small spots of open water could still be found near the east shore beaver den on Rocky Pond. A member of the weasel family foot prints could be seen crossing snow covered Rocky Pond. Lots of deer tracks throughout the forest and the tracks of a moose were found crossing the carriage trail near Rocky Pond.

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