

Wild Times at Pine Hill Park Fall Summary, 2017

The first day of Fall, 2017 found the forest very DRY and quiet. Acorns were falling, 2 beavers were seen swimming at Rocky Pond, a few gray tree frogs were calling, the only bird seen was a pileated woodpecker, and gray squirrels and Eastern chipmunk were busy collecting acorns.

A few days later, a near record high temp. was recorded on Sept. 23rd and the 24th. More birds were seen including pileated, hairy and red-bellied woodpeckers, numerous blue jays, black-capped chickadees, white-breasted nuthatch, tufted titmouse, red-eyed vireo, and magnolia warbler. At Muddy Pond could be found about 2 dozen Canada geese, one osprey, a small flock of wood ducks, a belted kingfisher and painted turtles basking on a log. 2 LARGE black snakes were seen at Rocky Pond and white admiral and painted lady butterflies could be seen flying about.

At the end of Sept., I was still watering the American Chestnut seedlings on a regular basis due to the lack of any substantial rainfall. The forest was quiet, with Gray squirrels and Eastern chipmunks still actively collecting acorns.

The first week of Oct. found the forest wildlife typical for this time of year, but also some unusual sightings. There were about 200 Canada geese and a half dozen wood ducks at Muddy Pond, black-capped chickadees, blue jays and white-breasted nuthatches commonly seen, and my first woolly bear caterpillar of the season. Acorns were still falling. And I was surprised to see an Eastern garter snake up near Rocky Pond. Fall foliage was a bit of a disappointment this year. We had a dry, warm summer and early fall, with only one night reaching those cold temperatures which play such an important role in the fall foliage.

Mid-October found the number of falling acorns drastically reduced. A small flock of hermit thrushes and another small flock of white-throated sparrows were seen along with a larger flock of yellow-rumped warblers. They were flying through the forest ahead of the first major cold front moving into the area from the North.

The third week of October found acorns still falling, fall foliage was at its peak, but not near as impressive as years past, about 150 Canada geese were seen at Muddy Pond, and the population of forest birds was now taking on the typical numbers and species you usually find in the forest during the winter months. Once again, I was surprised to see an 8 inch garter snake on Crusher Road.

The beginning of November finally found cold temperatures descending upon the land. Fall foliage had come to an end, trees along the 3 lower Giorgetti trails had lost almost all their

leaves, robins could be seen migrating through the forest in large numbers, Canada geese were flying overhead, and tufted titmouse were now flying in small flocks, typical of what you would find in winter.

On Nov. 11th, temperatures reached the low 20s, black-capped chickadees(some of which were very curious and would fly right up to me) were flying in flocks, and a few spots along the shoreline of Rocky Pond were covered with a thin layer of ice. The whole perimeter of Muddy Pond was also covered in a thin layer of ice. I was particularly impressed with the "acorn fall" this year. Since first visiting the forest in 2012, never have I seen so many acorns on the ground. Should be a good year for deer, squirrels and chipmunks.

The last week of November found the forest covered in a thick layer of fallen leaves. Most trees have lost their leaves and only a few birds would be seen on my walks. Both ponds were covered with a thin layer of ice, with the exception of the very center of the ponds. Many trees along the shores of Rocky Pond showed recent beaver activity. It's hard to believe the increase in size of the East side beaver den on Rocky Pond. This time last year, it was a small pile of a few small branches. Now, it's massive.

By the second week of December, loose associations of tufted titmouse and black-capped chickadees could be found throughout the forest, and both ponds were completely covered over in a thin layer of ice. Water level at Rocky Pond is the lowest I've seen it for a long time. Beaver dams are intact, so I know it's just been the lack of precipitation which had contributed to the low level.

Finally got an appreciable snow mid-December. About 6 inches of snow on the ground, with MANY deer tracks throughout the forest. You could also find numerous piles of leaves where deer had been looking for acorns underneath the snow. Hairy woodpeckers, white-breasted nuthatches, tufted titmouse and crows flying overhead were a common sight. Both ponds completely covered with a now thickening layer of ice, with the exception of small open water areas near the west side beaver den on Rocky Pond, and the east side beaver den on Muddy Pond. Gray squirrels seen in the forest, but no chipmunks.

That's it for this issue, please stay on the trails, and enjoy the Wild Times At Pine Hill Park.