

Wild Times at Pine Hill Park

Winter, 2018

The official start of Winter in December of 2017 started off with bitterly cold temperatures and a forest covered in a few inches of snow. Both Rocky and Muddy Ponds were completely covered in ice and snow. Birch seeds lying in the snow were a common site, especially at the base of adult birch trees. Many deer, rodent and carnivore tracks could be found throughout the forest, and many spots could be seen where deer and squirrels had dug through the snow to reach acorns and other food hidden beneath the snow. On a Jan. 2nd hike, the only birds I saw or heard were a hairy woodpecker, crow, and white-breasted nuthatches. I was happy to see porcupine tracks near the power lines on the Carriage Trail leading up to the rocky cliffs. The same cliffs which were the site of active porcupine dens in previous years. While sitting quietly next to the beaver den on the East side of Rocky Pond, I was treated to the sounds of groans of grunts of active beavers inside the den.

One day, during the second week of January, a warm front moved through the area bringing with it showers and temperatures high enough to melt most of the snow. During the night, the rain ended relatively abruptly followed by sub-zero temperatures which froze the water on the ground forming a layer of ice on the ground and a layer of shallow snow on top of the ice. The whole forest was covered in this ice/snow layer. Still, many gray squirrel food caches could be seen dug up in the snow/ice where squirrels were retrieving some of their food stores. On Jan. 14th, the only birds seen on my walk were a small flock of black-capped chickadees. Many rabbit, fox, deer and gray squirrel tracks could be seen.

Jan. 20th was a beautiful day with clear skies and temperatures in the low 40s. Typical winter birds seen included hairy woodpecker, tufted titmouse, pileated woodpecker, downy woodpecker, black-capped chickadee, and white-breasted nuthatch. It was also the first time this season I had seen SNOW FLEAS at the base of many trees. Always a sign to me that the worst of winter was behind us. I came across coyote and deer tracks next to each other and decided to follow them. The tracks led me to a deer carcass. The deer was only partially eaten, so I knew the coyote and other scavengers would be back to finish eating at a later time.

The first week of Feb. found 4" of snow on the ground. White-breasted nuthatch, tufted titmouse, pileated woodpecker, and golden-crowned kinglets were the only birds seen. Both the kinglet and red squirrels were seen at Muddy Pond, which is one of the few places in the park where both those species can be occasionally found. Rodent, deer, coyote and fox tracks a common sight.

On Feb. 11th, 15" of snow was on the ground. Lots of deer and squirrel tracks, and uncovered food caches could be seen throughout park, and the only birds seen were white-breasted

nuthatch, crow, and a small flock of common redpoll near the trailhead parking lot. Many signs of active pileated woodpeckers around lower trails.

The third week of Feb. found the area undergoing a warming trend with temperatures reaching 70 degrees F on Feb. 21st. Consequently, many bare ground areas could be found throughout the park. Many streams had flowing water, and Rocky and Muddy Ponds, though completely covered in ice, both had a thin layer of water covering the ice. Even saw a few small midges flying about. Saw a gray squirrel sticking its head out of an old abandoned pileated woodpecker hole, a most endearing sight.

On Feb. 24th, temperatures were back in the low 40s. More and more bare ground was appearing throughout the forest, with only north-facing slopes containing any appreciable amount of snow. Cardinal and tufted-titmouse could both be heard singing. Many gray squirrels seen running throughout the forest. And small areas of open water could be seen along the edges of both beaver dens on Rocky Pond.

The first week of March found a few inches of snow on the ground dropped by a nor'easter which came through the area. Bare spots of ground could be found where that ground was exposed to lots of sunlight. Dark-eyed junco, black-capped chickadee, white-breasted nuthatch, and crow were seen. Both ponds were showing open water in spots around their perimeters. On March 4th, an otter was seen at Muddy Pond.

3 nor'easters came through the area in March. By mid-March, cold temperatures had returned, both ponds were once again completely frozen over, and there was an average of 8" of snow on the ground. On March 18th, a few days before the official start of spring, birds seen included crow, black-capped chickadee, golden-crowned kinglet, brown creeper and white-breasted nuthatch.

Bobcat were once again photographed in the park. The exact time and location is being kept secret in order to insure their privacy and protection.

That's it for this season summary. Please stay on the trails and enjoy your wildlife viewing and experiences at Pine Hill Park.