CORNELL LAB of ORNITHOLOGY

Winter Trail Guide

to Sapsucker Woods

Summer's hidden bird nests become visible once the leaves have fallen. Look for mud-stiffened nest bowls of American Robins, hanging cup nests of Red-eyed Vireos, and dark holes on trees that lead to cavity nests of birds such as the **White-breasted Nuthatch**.

Both **red squirrels** and gray squirrels den in tree cavities during the winter, often sharing the space with other squirrels of the same species. Gray squirrels also build two or three leafy nests each (called "dreys") in treetops for loafing and sleeping in warmer conditions.

Because of ice and snow, foraging in winter can be difficult for birds. **White-throated Sparrows** and other birds eat the seeds left behind as plants die or go dormant for the winter. These bushes and grasses also provide cover from predators.

Changes in daylength trigger hormones that stimulate birds to sing. As days get longer following the winter solstice, an increasing number of winter birds can be heard belting out their breeding songs or drumming on tree trunks in anticipation of the upcoming breeding season. The clear whistled *fee-bee* of the **Black-capped Chickadee** is one of the earliest winter songs heard in Sapsucker Woods.

Listen carefully and you might be rewarded with the "tap-tap-tap" of a foraging woodpecker. Woodpeckers search for insects beneath the bark of dead trees. Smaller woodpeckers chip away at the outermost bark, while larger woodpeckers, such as the **Pileated Woodpecker,** excavate deep cavities in search of prey.

Although **a thick layer of snow** seems calm on the surface, a whole world of activity bustles beneath. When snow accumulates, air is trapped between the flakes, creating an insulated environment in which mice, voles, and other small mammals spend their winters burrowing tunnels out of the reach of frigid winter winds.

Owens Observation Platform

Sherwood Observation Platform

Winter is a beautiful season to visit Sapsucker Woods.

Most trees stand bare, and the branches and bushes are busy with birds searching for food in the frigid landscape. Deer mosey across the frozen pond to nibble at its brushy shores, and the crisp light is a reminder that spring has yet to come.

If you have enjoyed our trails, please consider becoming a member of the Lab. Information is available in the Visitors' Center or at <www.birds.cornell.edu>.

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Visitors' Center

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Tracks in the snow reveal a world full of motion. The hopping tracks of **Dark-eyed Juncos** and the dainty steps of Mourning Doves cross those of squirrels and deer, charting the complex paths animals take as they search for food and cover in the winter environment.

Look carefully at **male Northern Cardinals**: their drab back feathers make it hard for predators to spot them from above. As spring nears, the dusky tips of these feathers wear away, revealing bright red feathers that females find more attractive.

Woods Shelter

Podell Boardwalk

Birds of a different feather sometimes flock together. **Tufted Titmice**, Black-capped Chickadees, Downy Woodpeckers, and White-breasted Nuthatches (among others) all spend time foraging and traveling together through the woods in mixed-species flocks.

No one knows for sure why oak and **beech trees** hold on to their dead leaves for the winter. Some scientists speculate that these trees, relative newcomers to our northern forests, are still adapting to winter; others think the leaves deter deer from browsing.

It's hard to miss the pockmarks and fractures resulting from **beech bark disease.** This disease occurs when nonnative wooly beech scale insects injure a beech tree's bark. These injuries allow bark fungus to infiltrate and eventually disfigure or kill the tree.

Some plants stay green all winter, holding on to their leaves despite the snow. The needles of **coniferous trees** are actually small, tough leaves that reduce the amount of water they lose to winter's dry winds. They also shed snow better than leaves from deciduous trees. This enables them to photosynthesize through the winter (albeit at a reduced rate).

Deciduous woodlands in winter can seem gray and featureless without leaves Yet, even without leaves, it is possible to identify many trees and shrubs by their bark. As you walk the trails, look for the shaggy, loose bark of **shagbark hickories**, the scaled bark of black cherry trees, and the smooth red bark of **red osier dogwoods**.

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- Wilson Trail, with boardwalk
- Other trails, in part
- Ponds and pools
- Marsh and wetlands
- Paved areas

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