

This Week in the Woods December: Week Five

DECEMBER: WEEK FIVE



Funky ice formations



Christmas fern



American basswood buds



Walking fern



Brown creeper



Virgin's bower



Fisher tracks



Beard lichen



Fringed candleflame lichen
or sunburst lichen (?)

This Week in the Woods, those of us who celebrate Christmas did so amid weather that seemed appropriate for 2020 - i.e., a heavy rain that washed away the snow. The rain left in its wake roaring streams and rivers, and dangling above them: **funky ice formations**, some of which were photographed this past weekend by Meghan McCarthy McPhaul. The formations result from a combination of dripping snowmelt and super-cold water splashing up and freezing on overhanging logs and other surfaces.

The rain also revealed a variety of evergreen plants including **Christmas ferns**. These ferns are distinctive for the little bump on each leaflet near the stalk, a shape often compared to a Christmas stocking. As [Allaire Diamond notes in this *Outside Story* essay](#), it's not easy being green during a northeastern winter, and one way Christmas ferns cope is to flatten onto the ground, a tactic that may keep them up to 18 degrees warmer than if they remained standing upright. How do they change their profile? "Some cells in their lower stem die, forming a 'hinge' which allows the fern fronds to sprawl on the ground."

This time of year, if you find a round, rosy red bud at the tip of a tree stem, it's a good bet that you're looking at an **American basswood**. We featured Mary Holland's photo of a basswood bud, and her description of winter feeding on the tree's nutlets, in the Winter 2020 issue of *Northern Woodlands* magazine. You can see her photo and original post on her ["Naturally Curious" blog](#).

Walking fern is also still green. Unlike Christmas fern, this plant never stuck out to begin with; it typically clings to the sides of rocks and cliffs. As noted in its [Native Plant Trust profile](#), walking fern got its name from its ability to grow new roots from the tips of its long, spear-like fronds. "As this process is repeated, the plant may appear to 'walk' a short distance." Note: although classified as "fairly widespread" in Vermont, walking fern is "extremely rare" to "endangered" in New Hampshire. Perhaps one reason is that this is a plant that loves a high soil pH, and the Granite State, on average, has more acidic soils. If you're curious why there's an interstate soil split, check out this [Outside Story article from Chuck Wooster](#) – the second essay ever published in the series, back in March 2002.

If you're looking at a tree and a piece of bark suddenly scuttles up the trunk, chances are you're seeing a **brown creeper**. We've found them frequently this past week, gleaning insects from bark with their long, curved beaks. As noted in this [profile from The Cornell Lab's "All About Birds,"](#) these little birds can live on about four to ten calories a day. Put another way, "by eating a single spider, a creeper gains enough energy to climb nearly 200 feet vertically." Here's a ["Birds in Focus" column by Bryan Pfeiffer](#) from our archive, which notes that although brown creepers are in our forest year-round, they also migrate. As discussed in previous blog posts, for many bird species, migration is complicated, and may vary both by individual bird and by year. One of the reasons we may be seeing so many brown creepers now, is that some may have flown down from Canada.

The fluffy seed heads of **virgin's bower** are conspicuous along hedgerows and other disturbed sites. According to this [profile from the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center](#), the plant's late-blooming flowers are favored by hummingbirds and bumblebees, although all parts of it are poisonous to humans. The diversity of common names for the plant suggest that it's something of a Rorschach test. One person's "virgin's bower" is another's "old man's beard," "devil's

darning needles,” or “traveler’s joy.” Note: there is more than one species of virgin’s bower, and non-natives are hard to distinguish from the native kind, *Clematis virginiana*, especially this time of year.

We found these **fisher tracks** moving in a 3x4 lope down a game trail, with occasional side trips to investigate rock crevices. As explained by Mark Elbroch in his excellent book, *Mammal Tracks and Sign*, a lope involves each foot touching down “independently of the others, as in walks, but in rapid succession.” In a 3x4 lope, the animal touches down in a clockwise sequence – left front, right front, right rear, left rear – but a front and rear foot print on the same side overlap. This is a typical gait for a fisher and other members of the weasel family, although fishers also frequently alternate gaits on-the-fly. They are also excellent climbers – a valuable trait for an animal that often preys on squirrels and porcupines. Here’s a [link to Susan Morse’s column about fisher feet](#) in the Winter 2019 issue of *Northern Woodlands*, and an [Outside Story essay about fisher by Joe Rankin](#).

Last week, we included a photo of boreal oakmoss, and noted that it was easy to confuse with **beard lichen**, but that beard lichen is stringier. Beard lichen (multiple species), which is also commonly called by its genus name *Usnea*, grows on trees, and it’s easy to spot this time of year. As noted in this [link from the United Kingdom’s Woodland Trust](#), showing photos of multiple species, these lichens are sensitive to air pollution.

Finally, we couldn’t resist including this yellow lichen... even though its identity is still a bit of a mystery to us. Our educated guess (after browsing through *Lichens of North America* by Irwin Brodo and Stephen and Sylvia Duran Sharnoff – an outstanding 800-species resource) is that this is a photo of **fringed candleflame lichen**, *Candelaria fibrosa*. However, the authors note that this species is very difficult to distinguish from **poplar sunburst lichen**, *Xanthoria hasseana*, which is more common. Whatever its name, its bright color is welcome this time of year.

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