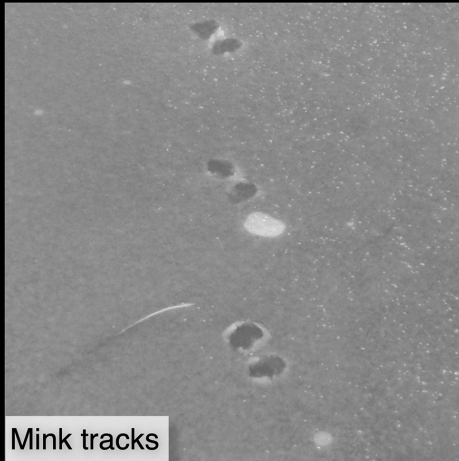


# This Week in the Woods December: Week One

DECEMBER: WEEK ONE



Bur-reed



Mink tracks



Witch-hazel



Running clubmoss



Pine grosbeak (female)



Speckled alder



Hoarfrost



Tolyposcladium fungus



Rock tripe

**This Week in the Woods**, we found the spiky seed balls of **bur-reed** in a beaver meadow. The plants (several species) grow in shallow water and wet soil; we often find them at the edge of marshes. According to John Eastman, writing in his book, *Swamp and Bog*, a number of creatures live in, and feed on, bur-reed, and at least one uses the plant as a sort of snorkel: long-horned beetles use rear spines to harvest oxygen from plant tissue. Bur-reeds are also closely associated

with muskrats, which apparently will eat every part of the plant. Here's a [link to a post by Mary Holland in her \*Naturally Curious\* blog](#), showing American bur-reed's summer form, and noting its service as a means to reduce nitrogen and phosphorus buildup in wetlands.

Speaking of wetlands – and moving up the food chain – Northern Woodlands staff member Dan Lambert found these **mink tracks** crossing thin ice. Mink, which prey on muskrats, often leave a classic weasel family “2-2 pattern” track, in which the larger hind feet register in (or almost in) the front track. According to Paul Rezendes, in *Tracking and the Art of Seeing*, one way to distinguish mink tracks from those of smaller weasel kin is that mink leave “more consistent strides...the mink's gait tends to be more evenly spaced throughout the trail.” Here's an *Outside Story* [article by Kathy Doyle](#), describing her own fleeting glimpse of a mink, and a second [article from the series by Meghan McCarthy McPhaul](#), who describes the mink as the “adept middle child” of the mustelid family, “taking advantage of its adaptations both in the water and on land to make a living.”

Earlier this autumn, **witch-hazel** produced bright yellow flowers with dangling petals. The petals have fallen, but the yellow sepals remain and are beautiful in their own right. Check out author [Janet Pesaturo's blog post about witch-hazel](#), which includes photos showing its change over the autumn season. And here's a [profile from The Native Plant Trust](#), including such fun facts as the traditional use of witch-hazel for dowsing, and its approach to seed distribution, “sometimes hurling them 30 feet away from the parent tree.”

**Running clubmoss** goes by many other names, including common clubmoss, staghorn, and running pine. It's one of those ancient forest-floor evergreens – survivors of a time before the rise of woody trees – that become more noticeable this time of year. Here's a [profile of the plant from The Native Plant Trust](#), and an *Outside Story* [essay](#) (previously cited in this series) by Edna Greig, that explains what makes clubmosses so distinctive from other, later-evolving plants.

We found several female **pine grosbeaks** feasting on dried crabapples by a field. The birds nest in Canada's boreal forests and often stay there in winter as well, but they will sometimes “irrupt” south into our region in the cold months, delighting birdwatchers. As their name indicates, the birds have big (“gros”) beaks – well-suited for crushing the seeds and buds that (along with fruit) are their typical foods. Here's an *Outside Story* [essay by Michael Caduto](#) – complete with an illustration of pine grosbeaks by Adelaide Murphy Tyrol – that describes the phenomenon of winter bird irruptions, and names some of our common visitors. And here's a [profile of pine grosbeaks from The Cornell Lab's All About Birds](#), including photos of the rose-colored males.

In winter, **speckled alder** has eye-catching purple catkins. These are the shrubs' future male flowers, which will bloom in early spring; smaller female catkins grow higher on the stem. A common shrub of wetlands and other sites with moist soil, speckled alders often grow in thickets, providing food and habitat for a variety of wildlife, including beavers and many nesting birds. Because their roots host nitrogen-fixing bacteria, they're often planted for soil restoration purposes. Here's a [profile from the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service](#).

"When you wake on a cold morning and look out to see the entire world – trees, bushes, your car – draped with lacy, feathery crystals glinting in the sunlight, it's magical," writes [Joe Rankin, in this Outside Story essay](#) about **hoarfrost**. As Rankin explains, the phenomenon occurs when super-saturated cold air ("Think a cold fog.") rises in calm air conditions, and sublimates directly from a gas to a solid. [Check out this link](#) for a time lapse view of hoarfrost developing on rose hips.

As far as we know, there is no common name for the shiny black dog-noses-on-stalks that have been popping up this past week in the woods, but they belong to a genus of parasitic fungus, **Tolypocladium**, and more specifically, to one of a group of summer-to-late-fall fungi within the genus that prey on false truffles and other fungi. Their bumpy dog-nose texture is due to tiny spore-bearing structures on the cap. For a closer look at a similar fungus (possibly the same species?), check out [this image from Project Noah](#).

Finally, with the damp weather, now's a good time to see **rock tripe** (several types) in all its weird glory. This is the lettuce-sized lichen that often grows on steep rock faces. In dry periods it shrivels, but it quickly softens up after rain and takes on a fruit leather texture. Joe Walewski's *Lichens of the North Woods* is a great source for odd facts about rock tripe; for example, some species can be ground up and fermented to produce purple dye, and they "have served as survival food for many Arctic explorers." (Other Arctic explorers, he notes, preferred to eat their boots.) Here's a [link to an article by Allaire Diamond](#) from the Summer 2009 issue of *Northern Woodlands* magazine, describing the history of rock tripe and other forest sources as dye ingredients.

*Our thanks to The Frank and Brinna Sands Foundation for helping to support this series.*

**Northern  
Woodlands**

PO Box 270, Lyme, New Hampshire 03768  
[mail@northernwoodlands.org](mailto:mail@northernwoodlands.org) / 603-795-0660  
[www.northernwoodlands.org](http://www.northernwoodlands.org)