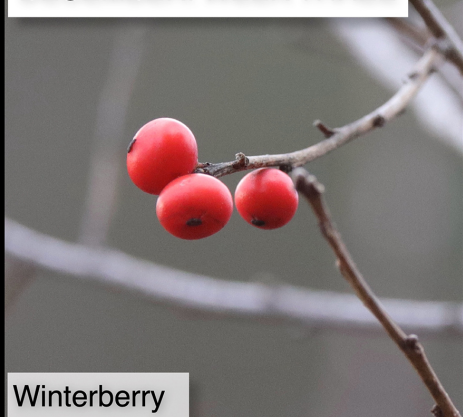


This Week in the Woods December: Week Three

DECEMBER: WEEK THREE



Winterberry



Pink lady's slipper seed pod



Redpoll



Moss sporophytes



Tufted titmouse



Birch polypore



Crowded parchment



Woolgrass



December sunrise

This Week in the Woods, we've been seeking out bright colors wherever we can find them, including on the edge of marshes, where **winterberry** often grows. The red fruits of this wild holly (more than one species) persist deep into winter and provide cold weather fuel for birds and other wildlife. Here's a [profile from the University of Vermont Extension's Department of Plant Soil and Science](#), which notes their preference for acidic soils.

Many **pink lady's slipper blossoms** go unfertilized, but those fortunate enough to meet up with a pollinator (typically, a bumblebee) produce pods containing thousands of tiny, wind-dispersed seeds. This time of year, you'll occasionally find split seed pods standing on brittle stems or knocked down onto the forest floor. We featured pink lady's-slipper when it was [blooming back in early June](#); here's a [profile from the Native Plant Trust](#) which shows how the seed pod appears in its summer form.

2020 is a "superflight" year, meaning that an abundance of unfamiliar Canadian birds are showing up in our woods, fields and yards. Here's a recently published article from Audubon discussing this phenomenon for finches. As [explained in the article](#), a spruce budworm outbreak resulted in an unusually successful Canadian bird breeding season, and a subsequent mast failure (trees synchronously not producing many or any seeds) prompted many birds to move south. **Redpolls** are among these irruptive birds, and we've seen them flitting between trees as well as on the ground, feeding on grass seeds. There are two species that may appear in our region in winter: common redpolls and (much less frequently) hoary redpolls. Although some hoary redpolls are easy to identify by their pale plumage, others are more difficult to discern from their common cousins by field characteristics. Both species breed in the Arctic. You'll see them gathered in winter flocks, constantly moving and jostling each other as they vie for that next seed. Here's a [profile of common redpolls from Cornell's All About Birds website](#). Northern Woodlands will publish an *Outside Story* article about common redpolls next week.

Those spiky things sticking up from moss are **sporophytes**, comprised of stalks with capsules on top. Emma Stuhl wrote about them in this [2016 post from the University of Vermont's Ecoblog](#), which includes some beautiful macrophotography. As explained in the blog, the fuzzy green parts of moss are gametophytes, "which give rise to sperm and eggs, which combine to grow a sporophyte." The sporophyte capsules release spores, which grow and eventually produce gametophytes, and the whole process starts again. Hence that age-old question: "Which came first? The gametophyte or sporophyte?" Only the chickens know.

Tufted titmice are common both in the woods and at feeders. These pretty little birds with grey crests are year-round residents of the woods, and as [Lee Emmons notes in this recent Outside Story essay](#), they're one of our few native bird species that appear to be growing in population. Although somewhat less bold than chickadees, they can be tenacious in their quest for seeds. In the [Spring 2020 issue](#) of *Northern Woodlands*, we published a humorous excerpt about them from Julie Zickefoose's book "Saving Jemima: Life and Love with a Hard-luck Jay." Zickefoose recalled her failed attempts to scare the titmice out of taking seeds that she'd set out in her studio for another bird: "I was outnumbered, and the titmice had long since stopped taking me seriously." You can learn more about the book, and Zickefoose's work as an artist, writer and bird rehabilitator, on her website.

Back in November, we mentioned the plight of poor Ötzi the Iceman, a 5,300-year-old mummy found in the Tirolean Alps, who had chunks of tinder polypore in his pouch. Turns out, Ötzi was also carrying pieces of **birch polypore**, and its purpose was likely medicinal; here's an [article from the *World Journal of Microbiology and Technology*](#), for example, which cites a range of traditional and modern medical uses for birch polypore, including as antibacterial and antiparasitic treatments. None of this matters, of course, to the fungus itself. It just goes about its quiet business, feeding on birch wood and producing puffy pancake-like fruiting bodies. Here's a [profile from Michael Kuo at MushroomExpert.com](#).

Once you start noticing **crowded parchment fungus**, you are likely to find it everywhere. It's corn flake-thin and small, grows on dead hardwood, and has wavy edges and orange-and-white striping. As Lawrence Millman notes in *Fascinating Fungi of New England*, this is a very common fungus, and "it's not unusual to see several hundred gregarious fruiting bodies laterally fused or in dense clusters on a single branch." Here are [additional images from iNaturalist](#).

There are multiple species of **woolgrass**, also called woolsedge. They're members of the *Scirpus* (bulrush) genus and grow in abundance in marshes. The bristles surrounding the seeds are what give the plants their frizzy appearance. Here's a [profile from the Virginia Native Plant Society](#), noting these plants' food value to waterfowl and wildlife, as well as their importance for creating cover.

Finally – we've been marveling at the quality of **sunrises** in the past week, especially in those areas with enough snow to contrast with the vivid pinks and oranges. Meghan McCarthy McPhaul took this image in the White Mountains. Why have sunrises been so spectacular recently? Here's a [primer from the National Weather Service](#), which delves into the science of sunrises/sunsets and explains that, contrary to popular belief, air pollution tends to dull sky color. The takeaway: there's faster air circulation in the cold months, and a slowing down of the photochemical reactions that cause haze. The result is brighter sky color.

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