

This Week in the Woods February: Week One

FEBRUARY: WEEK ONE



Ice fall



Eastern coyote



Deer browse



Red maple buds



White-winged crossbill



Epicormic sprouts



Bear claw marks



Paper birch



Stone wall

This Week in the Woods we've reached the middle of winter ([according to *Farmer's Almanac*](#), the exact midway point occurs on Wednesday, February 3 at 4:49 p.m.), and over the weekend, we celebrated by making a pilgrimage to our favorite **ice fall**. No, this isn't a frozen waterfall; in winter, seeps on rocky outcroppings produce layer upon layer of frozen ice, which build up to create stunning formations.

We haven't seen an **eastern coyote** this winter, but one large animal keeps appearing on our game cameras. As [Susie Spikol notes in this *Outside Story* essay](#), coyotes prepare for winter by growing luxuriant winter coats, which also give them a "heftier appearance." Another reason that they look big: eastern coyotes have a small amount of both wolf and dog genes in their lineage, and are larger, on average, than their western cousins. See this [article by Roland Kays in *The Conversation*](#), discussing eastern coyote genetics. And a fun fact: variation in coyote yip-howls can make as few as two animals sound like a large pack. [Check out this *Outside Story* essay](#) for an explanation of the *beau geste* effect.

The abundance of edge habitat created by humans, and relatively few predators, have contributed to unnaturally high populations of deer in most of the Northeast. One long-term result is poor forest regeneration in many areas, because the deer feed on so many young trees. Heavy **deer browsing** on native trees can also provide a competitive advantage to less-tasty invasive species such as common buckthorn. Here's an [audio piece by Erica Heilman](#), produced as part of Northern Woodlands' 2019-2020 *Resilient Forest* multimedia series, that explores the question, "How Many Deer is Too Many?"

Red maples won't bloom until April (a photo of red maple blossoms appeared in our very first [This Week in the Woods post](#), on April 21), but their buds are beautiful and offer welcome color. For an introduction to the science of tree buds – what they are, and how they open – check out this [Outside Story essay by Michael Wojtech](#).

Early Monday morning, Tig Tillinghast photographed this female **white-winged crossbill** high up on a pine tree behind the Northern Woodlands office in Lyme. The birds breed in northern coniferous forests and appear in our region as a winter irruptive species. Their bills are specially adapted to harvesting conifer seeds from cones. [Here's an *Outside Story* essay](#) by Vermont Center for Ecostudies conservation biologist Steve Faccio, who explains the complex bill-and-tongue maneuver that these birds use to overcome a cone's defenses. As Faccio observes, "it takes much longer to describe how a crossbill extracts a seed than it does for the bird to actually do it." Here's a profile of white-winged crossbills from [Cornell Lab's All About Birds website](#).

Epicormic sprouting is one way a tree reacts to stress, for example, disease. Dormant buds in the trunk and branches are activated, resulting in a messy, this-way-and-that appearance. You can read more about the [science of epicormic growth here](#).

We haven't seen bears tracks for over a month, but there's still evidence of their autumn activities, including these human hand-sized **bear claw marks**. For an explanation of why bears are such skilled tree climbers, check out this ["Tracking Tips" column by Susan Morse](#) from our

archive, in which Morse notes that bear shoulder blades are specially adapted for climbing. An interesting tip from the article: front claw marks often appear on a tree at an angle, whereas hind claw marks “are always straight up and down since the hind legs were directly below the bear.”

Why is **paper birch** white? As [Michael Snyder notes in this “Woods Whys” column](#) from our archive, the tree’s outer bark layers contain betulin crystals, “physically arranged in such a way (not unlike snow) to appear white.” Their highly reflective bark is an advantage in winter, helping to avoid rapid warming, which can trigger frost cracks and other injuries. As noted in a previous post, Bondcliff Books recently published a collection of Snyder’s “Woods Whys” essays; you can [learn more about the book here](#).

If you’re looking for a good spot to set up a game camera, consider placing it along a **stone wall**. Over the years, we’ve photographed many different animals, from woodchucks to bears, using these structures as forest highways. Their crevices shelter a variety of wildlife, and they’re also common hunting grounds (most of the times that we’ve seen weasels have been in fleeting glimpses, as whiskered faces peek out between the stones.) Here’s an [Outside Story essay about stone walls by Joe Rankin](#), describing their ecological significance and offering an estimate of how many miles of walls exist in New England (approximately 100,000). And [here’s a link](#) to the University of Connecticut’s “Stone Wall Initiative,” which also includes information about *Stone by Stone*, Robert Thorsen’s excellent book.

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