

This Week in the Woods February: Week Three

FEBRUARY: WEEK THREE



Grouse hole



Eastern hemlock stand



Barred owl



Shield lichen



Horned lark



Burl



Glacial erratic



Winter stonefly



Common juniper

This Week in the Woods, Northern Woodland’s assistant editor Meghan McCarthy McPhaul was “just skiing through the woods, lost in my thoughts, when a **grouse** burst out of the snow less than a foot from the ski track.” The bird left behind this beautiful impression of its body and one of its wings. As [Susan Morse notes in this Keeping Track column](#) from our Winter 2017 magazine, ruffed grouse create “snow roosts” by folding their wings and diving into the snow. They do this

not to ambush unwary skiers (as far as we know) but to hide from predators and take advantage of the snow's insulation.

Why do deer often bed down in **eastern hemlock stands**? The trees' thick boughs offer better shelter in winter weather than do most other tree species. Although mature hemlock can be massive – over 100 feet in height – they're slow-growing (over centuries), and most stands are regrowth from previous cutting. Here's an [article from our Summer 2011 magazine](#) about intensive 19th century use of hemlock tannins for leather making (with negative consequences for the trees), and here's a [profile of the species from the UNH Cooperative Extension](#) noting that, "besides deer, 90 bird species and 50 mammal species use hemlock stands in New England."

Several times this week, we've seen **barred owls** during the day, perched on field edges or flying silently through the woods. How can they fly without seeming to make any sound? The short answer is that the soft surfaces and jagged edges of owl wings are built to muffle sound. They also have a high wing-to-body size ratio, which means more lift, and fewer sound-producing flaps. Here's a [demonstration of the silence of owl flight](#) from the excellent BBC documentary "Super Powered Owls," comparing decibel waveforms produced by a pigeon, falcon, and barn owl flying over super-sensitive microphones. And here's a [KQED San Francisco "Deep Look" video short](#) that explains the science of silent owl flight and offers a close-up comparison of falcon and owl feathers. Finally, here's [an Outside Story essay](#) that discusses silent owl flight, as well as other adaptations that help the birds hunt successfully in the winter woods.

True to its name, **common greenshield lichen** is a lichen that's easy to find in the woods. It grows on trees, often either wrapping around a branch or spreading out in a circular (shield-like) shape on a trunk. Identifying features include its pale green lobes and dark brown-to-black undersides. However, as with most lichen, it's difficult to identify this species with 100 percent certainty. There are similar-looking greenshield lichens (as well as other non-greenshield look-alikes). According to Joe Walewski in *Lichens of the North Woods*, greenshield lichens are some of the first to recolonize areas that have experienced heavy air pollution. Here are [some views of common greenshield lichen](#) from iNaturalist.

Horned larks visited Thetford, Vermont this weekend, much to the excitement of local birders, and we managed to take some photos of a flock on a farm, where the birds were flitting around a field, and feeding on seeds next to a barn. The species gets its name from black feathers on the head that are often hard to see, but male birds will raise (like tiny horns) during breeding season. Here's a [profile from Cornell Lab's All About Birds](#), including a great image of this feather feature. As noted in the profile, horned larks favor open spaces such as fields and tundra, and nosh on both insects and seeds. They are occasional winter visitors to this area; most of their breeding range is in Canada.

What creates tree **burls**? As explained in [this *Outside Story* essay by Joe Rankin](#), these woody growths – which can take all kinds of strange forms – develop when a virus, fungus, bacterium or other trespasser disrupts a tree’s hormone production. Artisans take advantage of burls’ twisted grains, or “figures,” to create unique housewares and other items. Here’s an [article from the *Autumn 2019* magazine](#) by professional woodturner Nick Rosato, describing common types of burls and sharing images of some of his beautiful bowls.

When you encounter a boulder sitting by itself in the snow, you’re probably looking at a **glacial erratic**. It’s a stone cold reminder that the Laurentide Ice Sheet – in some areas over two miles thick – covered most of the Northeast a mere 20,000 years ago and left behind a profoundly altered landscape. Glacial erratics are travelers: they were lifted up into the ice, carried sometimes hundreds of miles, and then dropped again as the ice melted. Here’s a related [Outside Story essay by Michael Caduto](#).

February is peak **winter stonefly** mating season, and we found this specimen crawling on the banks of the Ompompanoosuc River. As noted in [this *Outside Story* essay by Bill Amos](#), stonefly nymphs emerge from the water at “midday in midwinter,” shed their nymphal skin and transform into winged adults. With only a few days to live, they seek out other stoneflies and engage in “courtship duets, males drumming their bodies against the surface they’re on, females responding with a drummed, ‘I am here.’” Side note: although these are “water bugs,” stoneflies – and the trout and other fish that eat them – benefit from forests. See this [Outside Story essay by Declan McCabe](#), explaining how submerged leaves contribute to aquatic food chains.

According to [this profile by the U.S. Forest Service](#), **common juniper** may be “the most widely distributed tree in the world.” In our region, it typically takes the form of a low-lying shrub. As noted in the profile, a number of mammals and birds feed on the seeds in juniper cones. Because of its tolerance for poor soils, the plant also can help rehabilitate disturbed sites. Here’s a [link from The Native Plant Trust](#) that includes images of common juniper in different seasons.

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