

This Week in the Woods January: Week Three

JANUARY: WEEK THREE

Otter tracks

Blackberry seed gall

Milk-white toothed polypore

Mouse nest material

Bohemian waxwings

Beaver meadow

Rove beetle (*C. flavidus*?)

Carpenter ant gallery

Turkey with acorn

This Week in the Woods, Meghan McCarthy McPhaul found tracks along a frozen brook. They were clearly made by a mustelid (member of the weasel family), but which species? Sliding marks and a water hole confirmed that these were the tracks of a **river otter**. Despite their name, river otters often haunt brooks, swamps and other small water bodies, and they will often cross significant stretches of dry land as they make their territorial rounds. See this [article from the Winter 2020 \(current\) issue](#) of *Northern Woodlands*, describing an otter restoration project in New York, in which otters released along big lakes often decamped to other sites. For help identifying otter tracks, check

out this [article by Keeping Track founder Susan Morse](#). This [Outside Story essay by Susie Spikol](#) considers the animal's celebrated playfulness and "sliding shenanigans."

This time of year, **blackberry seed galls**, bunched together on a blackberry cane, look like tiny pink-and-brown feather dusters. They're formed when a cynipid wasp injects its eggs into the tissues of a cane, along with substances that interfere with the plant's normal growth. Each of the wasp larvae grows in a separate capsule attached to a feather-like frond. Later, when the wasps hatch, the fronds fall away and the clustered galls take on a seedhead appearance. Here's a [link from bugguide.net](#) with images of hatched galls and an adult wasp. And here's a post about the galls from [Mary Holland's Naturally Curious website](#).

While crossing over a log, we noticed some odd-looking icicle formations, then looked more closely and realized that what we were seeing was a frozen fungus. **Milk-white toothed polypore** is a common fungus that you'll often find growing on hardwood snags and fallen branches. See this helpful [page from the Maryland Biodiversity Project](#), which shares a variety of images.

Sometimes, nature comes to us. And that isn't always a good thing. *Northern Woodlands* editor Cheryl Daigle discovered a **mouse nest** under the hood of her car this week, and gamely photographed the nesting material for this post. Mice will build winter nests in a variety of places, from bird nests to automobiles; the shredded, woolly material such as that shown in this photo, helps to keep them insulated from the cold. Speaking of rodents and other critters taking advantage of human-made structures, check out this [Outside Story essay by Michael Caduto](#), entitled, "When Nature Comes Knocking." And see this [Outside Story about the Tillinghast family's misadventures](#) chauffeuring red squirrels.

Meghan McCarthy McPhaul took this image of **Bohemian waxwings**, which she discovered feeding on the fruit of a highbush cranberry and flitting back and forth among the trees. Cousins of the more familiar cedar waxwings, the birds breed in Canada and Alaska, typically in open coniferous or mixed forests, for example, on the edge of a wetland. They often appear in our region in winter, and until insects return, they'll be feeding mostly on dried fruit. As noted in this [species profile from Cornell Lab's All About Birds](#), "the high sugar content of dried fruit means that waxwings frequently drink water and even eat snow to help with digestion." There are two relatively easy ways to distinguish these birds from cedar waxwings: Bohemians have gray (not yellow) bellies and rust-colored (not white) undertail feathers.

Beaver meadows provide food and shelter for a diversity of species. These wet grasslands form when beavers disappear from their ponds – often because the animals have cut down all nearby food trees and departed for better habitat. Eventually, the neglected dam fails, the water drains away, and what's left is an open patch ringed by drowned trees (great for wildlife that den or nest in cavities, and a buggy food source for woodpeckers) and regenerating, shrubby edge. But why do beaver meadows stay open, even when beavers are slow to recolonize the area? As John Pastor explains in

this [article in the Autumn 2016 issue](#) of *Northern Woodlands*, part of the reason may be the absence of mycorrhizal fungi that promote tree growth, and the reluctance of red-back voles (which spread fungal spores with their droppings) to move into these areas. The article offers a fascinating look at the complex interactions between species that shape our landscape.

We were surprised to see a winged beetle flit down onto the snow, right into a patch of spring tails (“snowfleas”). And then we were even more surprised when it reacted to our camera by arching its body, as shown in the photo. This is a **rove beetle**, probably *Carcinocephalus flavidus*, which is distinguished in part by its short elytra (forewings) that only partially protect the translucent hindwings. Rove beetles (multiple species) are predatory beetles that often appear in moist leaf litter habitat and are sometimes spotted on top of the snow. (We don’t know if it was preying on the springtails, but we have our suspicions.) Here are some additional [photos of the insect from bugguide.net](#). As for the arching maneuver, this is also a typical rove beetle tactic and may be a warning signal that the beetle is about to deploy a chemical irritant from the tip of its abdomen. See this [link describing a British species](#) (with the intriguing common name of “devil’s coach horse”), which notes, “They are well-known for curling up their abdomens like the tail of a scorpion when threatened.”

Carpenter ants are common members of the forest wrecking crew and are often responsible for the sawdust you’ll find spilling out of an old snag. Their galleries are complex and (if not in your house) beautiful structures, with wandering larval chambers and corridors chewed through the wood. Here’s an [Outside Story essay about the insects by Madeline Bodin](#), noting that carpenter ants survive cold northern winters by fattening up, sealing themselves into their colonies, and stocking their bodies with natural antifreeze.

Finally, we love this photo of a **wild turkey** by Tig Tillinghast, taken when the bird was in the act of running off with an acorn in its beak. Although the acorn piles of autumn have dwindled, turkeys, deer, and other animals are still finding acorns under the snow. You can find evidence of this feeding in disturbed areas where leaves are mixed with the snow’s surface. Here’s an [Outside Story essay \(previously shared\) by Carolyn Lorie](#), describing how turkeys can dig through about six inches of snow. (No doubt they also benefit from areas in deeper snow, where deer have already done some of the excavation work.)

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