# This Week in the Woods March: Week Five


**This Week in the Woods**, lakes and rivers have opened up again, and hooded mergansers are back. As Michael Caduto notes in this *Outside Story* essay, hoodies are short-distance migrants and typically pair up in late autumn, behaviors that help them get an early start on spring breeding season. Like wood ducks, they're cavity nesters, and may lay their eggs in tree holes high above the forest floor. But unlike wood ducks, they dive for food, hunting fish and aquatic invertebrates.

We were surprised to find what looked like patches of bluish-gray velvet floating on woodland puddles and spinning in the eddies of seasonal streams. As we watched, these velvety patches shimmered, and flecks on the edges hopped away to land elsewhere on the water's surface. Macro photography revealed what was going on. These were concentrated masses of **springtails**, also called snowfleas, which are not true insects but have their very own class, *Collembola*. As Declan McCabe notes in this previously shared *Outside Story* essay, springtails' hard outer layer, or cuticle, repels water. This is a useful trait, he explains, for terrestrial springtail species that get swept up in snow melt. It also protects aquatic species that graze on top of the water's surface.

We found **dwarf scouring rush** sticking up through the leaves and snow by an icy stream. Scouring rushes are not true rushes but members of the ancient horsetail genus Equisetum – primitive vascular plants that grew to tree size during the Carboniferous Period. As noted in this profile from The Native Plant Trust, dwarf scouring rush is New England's smallest horsetail species and is distinctive for its curly stems. Look for it along the edges of streams, swamps, and other wetlands.

We've been seeing, and hearing, **Canada geese** overhead, and are now noticing that some of the birds appear to be squabbling over nesting territories. As noted in this profile by Audubon, geese may select a variety of nesting sites, including the tops of muskrat houses.

We were excited to see our first **mourning cloak butterfly** of the season, flitting around the edge of the wetlands behind the Northern Woodlands office. As shown in the photo, mourning cloaks' underwings are dark with a bark-like pattern and a white border. Above, they're more eye-catching with blue spots and a yellow border along the edges of brown wings. These butterflies spend the winter in their adult form – tucking themselves under bark or other shelter in autumn – and emerge on sunny days in early spring. This time of year, they typically feed on tree sap, or perhaps thawing, rotten fruit. Here's an *Outside Story* essay by Bryan Pfeiffer discussing the species. And here's a link from iNaturalist with photos of mourning cloak butterflies that have their wings open.

We found several patches of snow on a little-used trail, each cradling a pile of grouse pellets. These are the **remains of grouse snow holes**, a form of winter shelter that we described in a February post in this series. As noted in this *Northwoods Star Journal* article, "When grouse snow roost for an extended period, they will defecate in the same spot inside that roost, resulting in a kind of little latrine. The droppings have a lot of wood in them, because grouse have special digestive tracts that allow them to digest fibrous woody tree parts." Now that deep snow is unavailable, the birds are moving into thickets and other cover.

With waters roaring, now seems a good time to note the importance of **coarse woody debris**, a.k.a. CWD, to stream and river health. Fallen trees and other wood slow water flow (and thus reduce erosion) and create diverse habitat features, including pools and shade for fish and other aquatic organisms. Here's an article from the Spring issue of *Northern Woodlands* magazine that describes the astonishing diversity of life in forested waters, and the importance of forests to water health.

Amphibians have begun migrating back to some vernal pools. We've been frequently checking one relatively high altitude and shady pool, and have found a few **eastern (red-spotted) newts** lurking among the submerged leaves (it's unclear whether they're recent arrivals, or spent the winter hidden under the ice). Eastern newts have a fascinating life cycle. After beginning life in the water, juveniles emerge as terrestrial **red efts**, steeped in toxins that deter most predators. They later return the water to become aquatic adults. This transition makes sense for newts that live in permanent waterbodies such a ponds…but how do they survive in vernal pools that dry out in summer? It turns out that the species has a special trick: if their watery habitat dries out or otherwise becomes inhospitable, the adults can become terrestrial again. Here's an article about eastern newts from Mongabay, which describes their "life in several acts." The article also describes scientists' concern that newts' prevalence and mobility make them potential "superspreaders" for Bsal, a fungal pathogen with plague-like impacts on amphibian populations.

And finally, we found a few brave sprigs of **herb-Robert**, a species of native geranium, emerging from the leaf litter. Here's a profile from the Native Plant Trust. Unlike the spring ephemeral wildflowers that will soon be making their appearance, herb-Robert is able to grow in shade, and you may find its bright pink flowers from late spring through early fall. (Note: on the West Coast, it's considered an invasive, but it's native to the Northeast.)

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