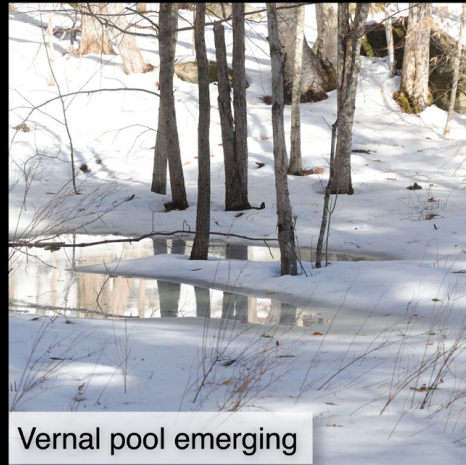


This Week in the Woods March: Week Three

MARCH: WEEK THREE



Pussy willow catkins



Vernal pool emerging



Winter crane fly



Nectria canker



Eastern bluebird



Reverse tracks



Woodland strawberry



Snow spider



Brown jelly fungus

This Week in the Woods, the snow's melting and the March winds roar. Spring is on its way.

Out in the wetlands, **pussy willow catkins** are emerging from their buds. As noted in this [Outside Story essay from Michael Caduto](#), the fuzzy coverings protect the interior flower parts from harsh early spring weather. Once pussy willow catkins fully open, they provide early season food for pollinators, "a bounty of mustard-colored pollen that is an important food for honeybees, moths,

and other insects that buzz from bloom to bloom.” Here’s [additional information](#), and more photographs, from the Brooklyn Botanic Garden.

Another sign of spring is the emergence of **vernal pools**, as snowmelt fills their basins. You’re unlikely to see life stirring on or underneath the water’s surface so early in the season, but keep an eye out over the next month as the pools undergo rapid change. Here’s an [article by editor Cheryl Daigle](#) from the current issue of our magazine, describing the [Vernal Pool Monitoring project](#) created and led by the Vermont Center for Ecostudies (VCE).

This week, assistant editor Meghan McCarthy McPhaul found a winged **winter crane fly**, which looks a bit like a mosquito, but doesn’t bite. As noted in this [post from the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee Field Station](#), many species of winter crane fly “overwinter as adults in sheltered nooks and crannies and are abroad in the chilly (but not freezing) air of early spring and late fall—even during mid-winter thaws, when they may be seen walking on snow.” Our best guess is that this fly was out looking for a mate.

When you find many concentric layers of wound scars on the side of a hardwood tree, you’re probably looking at a **nectria canker**. This disfigurement is caused by one of several related fungi. As noted in this [U.S. Forest Service profile](#), nectria infections typically don’t kill trees, but they are likely to reduce wood value. Another potential harm to an infected tree is that the canker creates openings for other parasites to invade.

We’ve seen flocks of male **eastern bluebirds** this week, although no females yet. This is typical in the Northeast, where males often show up before females. This week’s [Outside Story essay by Lee Emmons](#) notes that flocks of bluebirds travel together during the winter, and that their range has been shifting northward in recent years. These beautiful birds, members of the thrush family, are early spring breeders. Males will establish territories and scope out potential homes soon (which they’ll show off to their mates, the ultimate arbiters) so now’s your last chance to put up bluebird boxes. Here’s an [Outside Story essay by Li Shen](#) describing challenges to bluebird breeding success and volunteers’ successful efforts to boost their numbers by erecting customized nest boxes. And here’s a [species profile from the Cornell Lab’s All About Birds](#) site. A second page from Cornell Lab, [available here](#), offers a downloadable nest box construction plan.

If you’ve been out walking in the woods this week, you may have noticed odd-looking rows of raised snow formations. These are **reverse tracks**, created by the weight of feet (or hooves or paws) compacting snow in such a way that the tracks are less susceptible to melting than the snow surrounding them. We’re seeing many of these tracks along game trails that deer frequent, as well as much larger, snowshoe-sized ones along favorite paths. The same compaction that creates reverse tracks is responsible for hiking path “monorails,” areas where many footprints

create compressed lines of unmelted snow. Reluctance to walk on monorails – along with sloppy footing during mud season – can lead hikers to go off trail, which destroys fragile vegetation. Here's a [link about spring trails from the White Mountain Forest](#), with some common sense suggestions for how to avoid causing damage.

What a relief it is to start to see the green leaves of **woodland strawberry** emerging from the snow. These little plants never really went away; although we haven't seen them described as evergreen, occasionally this winter we've found them looking bright and healthy under snowpack. Here's an [early post from this series](#), showing a closely related species, wild strawberry, in bloom. The post also links to a [U.S. Forest Service page](#) explaining how to distinguish between woodland and wild strawberries.

A little over a year ago, we published an [Outside Story essay by Susie Spikol](#), describing how some **spiders** can live in and on snow. The reader reaction to this essay was mixed, with “cool!” and “nooooo!” being typical responses. We're on Team Spider and were pleased to find this tiny specimen, its legs and body together no bigger than a thumbnail, crawling along a sunny trail. As noted in Spikol's essay, northern spiders' adaptations may include sheltering in the subnivean zone (a.k.a. under the snow), filling their bodies with natural anti-freeze, and preying on springtails (“snow fleas”).

Finally, while it's too soon to find new mushrooms, we've been noticing the fruiting bodies of **jelly fungi** on sticks, thawing out of the ice. Here's an [Outside Story essay by Joe Rankin](#), explaining that the witch's butter and other jellies you see in winter aren't growing any more, but the fungi that produced them lives on inside the wood, and will produce new fruiting bodies in spring.

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