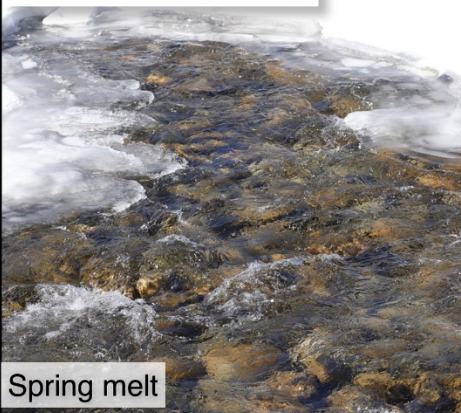


# This Week in the Woods

## March: Week Two

MARCH: WEEK TWO



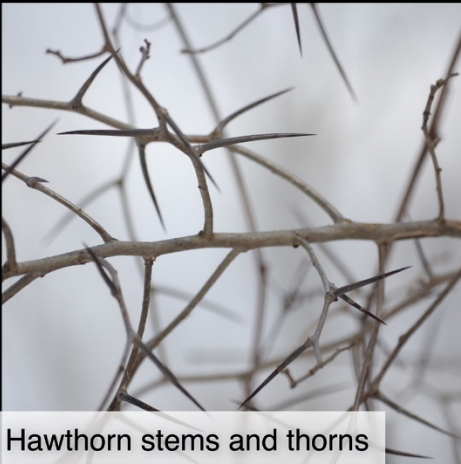
Spring melt



Mouse tracks



Cedar waxwing



Hawthorn stems and thorns



Forced red maple flowers



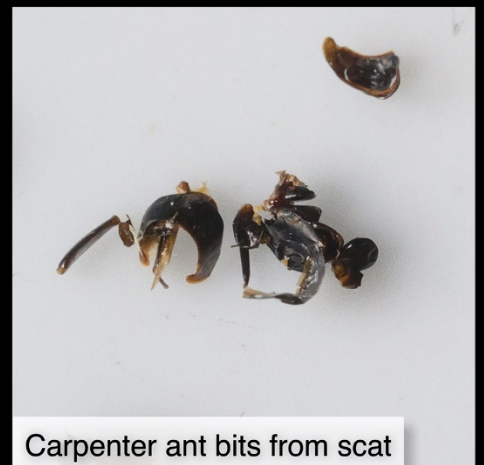
Bark beetle gallery



Pileated woodpecker holes



Pileated chips & scat



Carpenter ant bits from scat

**This Week in the Woods**, we're seeing more dripping icicles and openings in frozen streams and rivers. The **spring melt** has begun. This seasonal change has profound impacts on aquatic life, both from the runoff of nutrients that have been stored all winter in the ice pack (including salt

and other pollutants) and the sudden influx of oxygen into the surface water that triggers new life in lakes and ponds. See this [post from the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Center for Limnology](#), describing changes in spring lakes, and the critical role that wind plays in mixing oxygen into deeper waters.

In woods and meadows, **mouse tracks** in the snow tell tales of nighttime forays to harvest seeds from the tips of dried weeds, or to scurry between gaps in a stone wall. Here's a comparison of white-footed mouse tracks versus meadow vole tracks from [Mary Holland's Naturally Curious blog](#). As Holland notes (writing specifically about white-footed mice), mice are "bounders." Their tracks include symmetrical paw prints, often with a tail drag in the middle.

We've noticed flocks of **cedar waxwings** this week, feeding on dried fruit and cedar berries around homes. Is this a sign of the changing season? Not necessarily. Cedar waxwings are one of many bird species whose winter movements vary by individual. Some endure the cold in winter flocks, moving around the region but not making long distance flights. Others travel much farther, to southern wintering grounds. Here's a [species profile from the Cornell Lab's All About Birds](#).

[The Native Plant Trust's "Go Botany" site](#) lists 49 species of **hawthorn** in New England alone, and notes the difficulty of identifying individual species. What many hawthorns share, however, are outrageously sized thorns. These thorns are wickedly sharp and long – but because of their wide spacing, they aren't much protection from deer and other herbivores. So why do the plants bother to produce this weaponry? As noted in this [post from American Forests](#), written by Whit Bronaugh, many plants owe their appearance to creatures and conditions that no longer exist on the landscape, including ice age megafauna. "Osage-orange, mesquite, and hawthorn all bear stiff thorns, spaced too widely apart to do much good against narrow deer muzzles, but they would be unavoidably painful in the wide mouths of ground sloths and mastodons." And in the mouths of mammoths, as well. Here's an [Outside Story essay by Susie Spikol](#), describing the furry pachyderms that roamed our region a mere 10,000 years ago.

Early March is bleak, and at this point, many of us are weary of snow and craving spring color. It's too early for outside blooms, but you can bring tree stems inside to force early flowering. A good candidate is **red maple**, one of our earliest blooming tree species. This photo shows blooms from a cut stem we've kept for about 10 days in a vase on a sunny windowsill. Here's an [Outside Story essay by Chuck Wooster](#) explaining how to distinguish between red and sugar maples in any season, and a more [recent essay by Susan Shea](#), looking forward to April tree flowers. And here's an [archived answer key](#) to a "What in the Woods Is That?" quiz, showing another close-up image of a red maple blossom, along with images of quaking aspen and box elder flowers.

If you peel loose bark off a log, you may find intricate **bark beetle galleries** underneath. As Charley Eiseman and Noah Charney note in their field guide, *Tracks & Sign of Insects and other Invertebrates*, “The most basic type of bark beetle gallery begins with a mating chamber, from which the female excavates a linear tunnel of uniform width under the bark.” On either side of this line, she chews egg niches. “When the eggs hatch,” the authors explain, “each larva feeds by excavating its own tunnel away from the mother’s, without interfering with any of its siblings.” Each line ends at the point where the larva pupated and dug its way up into the bark.

If you’re up for a fun early spring treasure hunt (and aren’t squeamish), seek out a recent **pileated woodpecker hole**. This time of year, the woodpeckers are typically feeding on carpenter ants, which they excavate with gusto, leaving deep holes that ooze with resin. Even when you can’t immediately see the feeding hole up among the branches, you may find a telltale pile of **chips** scattered on top of the snow at the base of the tree. And, perhaps, the treasure: ashy-looking piles of scat. Which, of course, you’ll scoop up into the baggie or empty raisin box you brought for the purpose, and take home for closer viewing. Looking through a hand lens (or macro view on a camera or phone), you’ll likely see remnants of a massacre: piles of heads, legs and other chitinous **ant bits** that passed through the bird’s digestive system. Again, this activity has a gross factor, but it’s a fun activity for kids, and can be staged as a detective story, with them tasked to figure out why the bird was making holes in the tree. [Here’s an Outside Story](#) about the birds’ winter excavations by Meghan McCarthy McPhaul, describing their feeding technique: “After excavating a hole, a pileated woodpecker will use its long, barbed tongue to reach and scrape out the buggy delicacy within.” And here’s [another essay from the series](#), by Li Shen, describing how woodpeckers “peck and listen for differences in resonance to locate tunnels of their prey.” Shen’s essay also describes key anatomical features that make it possible for the birds to endure repeatedly banging their beaks against hard wood, including a “cushion of cartilage located where the skull meets the jawbone,” and a tightly packed brain.

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