# <u>This Week in the Woods</u> November: Week Four


**This Week in the Woods**, we've noticed **red osier dogwood** along wetland edges. This shrub often grows in multi-stemmed stands, and its bright red, speckled stems are eye-catching in the late autumn landscape. According to this profile from the U.S. Forest Service, red osier dogwood is the most widespread native dogwood species in North America. John Eastman, in his book *Swamp and Bog*, notes that its stands are favored nesting sites for a variety of birds, including yellow warblers.

If you're walking through a damp patch of woods, you may encounter what look like ice flowers pushing up through the leaves. These are **needle ice** formations, which author Rachel (Sargent) Mirus describes in this *Outside Story* essay. As Mirus notes, needle ice typically forms in late autumn and early spring, when saturated soil is exposed to freezing air. As water at the top of the soil freezes, "more water from the soil moves up towards the ice through capillary action." Over time, "ice is pushed up out of the soil, forming long, fragile columns."

There are several look-alike fungi in the genus *Trichaptum*, including what is most likely the species in our photograph: *T. biforme*, better known as **purple tooth** or violet-toothed polypore. This is a common bracket fungus that grows on dead hardwoods. It's easy to overlook, but it has a cool hidden feature: if you flip it over, you'll find a toothy purple underside. Here are additional photos and a profile from the Missouri Department of Conservation. Note: if you find one of these fungi growing on a conifer, you're probably looking at *T. abietinum*.

There are many different species of **sphagnum moss** in our region. They typically grow in mats in high-acidity wetlands such as bogs, fens, and woodland swamps. John Eastman (see above) explains how sphagnum moss helps to create bogs: as the weight of top-growing moss forces lower plants to drop under the water surface and out of the light, these lower plants die and release "tannins and acids that inhibit decay-causing bacteria." There's so much that's interesting about sphagnum mosses; for example, they're the most common source of peat used for gardening and fuel, and they're remarkably absorbent, due to special cells that hold water like a sponge. Here's a write-up on the plants from the Westborough Community Land Trust in Massachusetts. And here's a fun article from the *Irish Times*, describing the discovery of a 10 kilogram (22 pound), 2,000-year-old hunk of butter discovered in an Irish bog, and likely intended as a gift to the gods.

Given the approaching holiday, we've been on the lookout for **wild turkeys**, and we spotted a big flock of them in a farm field, where they appeared to be feeding on grass seeds. As Carolyn Lorié notes in this *Outside Story* article, this time of year the birds have sorted themselves into three types of flocks: hens, mature toms, and young jakes. For more about these birds, see this photo essay by Bob Michelson from the Autumn issue of *Northern Woodlands* magazine, and this article by Todd McLeish in the same issue, describing how wild turkey populations have rebounded in recent decades, to the point that some of them have become suburban miscreants. According to McLeish, in some parts of southern New England, "Turkeys are regularly reported chasing children waiting for their school bus and chasing adults as they walk neighborhood streets."

We featured **highbush cranberry** in a September post, but given that we're already writing about butter and turkeys, we decided to go three for three with the Thanksgiving theme (although,

disclaimer: highbush cranberry isn't a true cranberry, but a type of viburnum). It's a special pleasure to find these berries at the end of such a bleak month, glowing like stained glass in fields and wetlands. But why are they still here, when birds and other wildlife have already gobbled up most other wild fruit? Apparently, they don't become palatable until they age – or until wildlife have run out of better options. Check out this article by Susan Morse, from *Northern Woodlands* magazine's 2014 Autumn issue, in which she describes finding highbush cranberry seeds in spring bear scat, and how she "once deciphered a curious arrangement of canine rear-end and jumping-feet impressions in the snow. A coyote had repeatedly sat and studied her prize before springing upwards to get to the clusters of frosty cranberrybush fruits."

The largest of our eastern buteos (soaring hawks), **red-tailed hawks** are still sticking around after many other raptors have headed south. They often perch conspicuously on trees at the edge of fields and roads. As noted in *Hawks in Flight* by Peter Dunne, David Sibley, and Clay Sutton, they seem to be especially partial to highways, which have created "mile upon straight-cut mile of ideal hunting habitat and wintering habitat from the originally unusable forest." Here's a profile from Cornell Lab's All About Birds site.

The sprawling blades of **plantain-leaf sedge** (also called seersucker sedge) are still bright green, and many will retain their color all winter. Look for this plant in rich woods, for example, below cliffy areas where soil has washed down and accumulated. The blades often have a crinkled appearance; they look like they need a good ironing. Here's a profile by Chad Kirschbaum for the U.S. Forest Service, including a sentence that reads like a wine review: "With its plump perigynia and vivacious green leaves with dark purple sheaths, plantain-leaf sedge has plenty of sparkle to make even the mildest graminoid enthusiast giddy."

Finally – speaking of nature-inspired giddiness – we were excited to stumble upon a pile of leaves surrounded by bare soil, and liberally sprinkled with deer hair. Sure enough, a stick through the center revealed parts of a white-tailed deer carcass. This was a **bobcat cache**. You're more likely to find a cached deer in winter, when the cats prey upon winter-weakened animals or scavenge on winter-killed carcasses, however, a bobcat can kill a healthy adult deer with a bit of luck and a well-placed bite. Here's a post by Mary Holland from her Naturally Curious blog, which shows a winter cache scene.

*Our thanks to The Frank and Brinna Sands Foundation for helping to support this series.*

Northern Woodlands
**PO Box 270, Lyme, New Hampshire 03768**
**mail@northernwoodlands.org / 603-795-0660**
**www. northernwoodlands.org**