

This Week in the Woods November: Week Three

NOVEMBER: WEEK THREE



Purple pitcher plant



Red-eyed vireo nest



Tinder polypore



Fishing spider



Snow bunting



Acorn cache



Cup lichen



Crabapple



Tamarack (larch)

This Week in the Woods, the evenings are cold, the morning meadows are frosted with ice. It's time to get out the winter coats.

In bogs, **purple pitcher plants** are even more eye-catching than they were in summer, now that they've become more uniformly red. The tubes or "pitchers" of these carnivorous plants are not flowers but specialized leaves, shaped to trap invertebrates. As John Eastman notes in his book, *Swamp and Bog*, once a fly or other victim lands on the rim of the pitcher, "a coating of fine,

downward-pointing hairs and a numbing secretion make the insect's escape almost impossible." The prey eventually drowns in the rainwater pool at the bottom of the pitcher, which contains bacteria that aid in decomposition. In winter, the pool freezes, along with any undigested insect bits. Meanwhile, pitcher-plant midges, long-term residents of the plant, go into diapause inside the plant stem. Here's a [profile of purple pitcher plants](#) from The Native Plant Trust and an *Outside Story* [essay by Brett Amy Thelen](#), who notes that young amphibians may also fall prey to this plant.

With most tree leaves down, now is a good time to search for summer bird nests, including the cup-shaped **nests of red-eyed vireos**. Although the birds typically favor deciduous trees for nesting, the two nests we found this week were both in hemlocks. The nests have a distinctive look – they hang under the fork of a branch, and typically include outer layers of birch bark strips. Wasp nest paper is also a common building material. Sometimes, old bird nests are repurposed by mice and other rodents; the one in the photo was stuffed with acorns. Here's a [second photo of a red-eyed vireo nest and description](#) from Mary Hollands' Naturally Curious blog.

Poor Ötzi the Iceman. This 5,300-year-old mummy, discovered in the Tirolean Alps in 1991, suffered a host of health complaints: arthritis, worms, maybe Lyme disease, a broken nose, and a stone arrowpoint lodged in his shoulder (the evident cause of his death). But at least he could stay warm? In his pouch were chunks of **tinder polypore**. Also called hoof fungus, this is a hard-bodied bracket fungus of dead and dying wood (often birch) that grows throughout the northern hemisphere and is common in our woods. As its name indicates, it's useful for starting fires. It's easy to ignite, and burns slowly. Here's a [step-by-step instruction](#) for preparing the fungus as tinder, and a [photograph of the various items](#) found with Ötzi's mummy.

That humongous spider scurrying along a log may be one of several species of **fishing spider**. With the exception of dark fishing spiders, these arachnids are usually found on or near bodies of water. They eat tadpoles and minnows, as well as more typical insect prey. Here's an *Outside Story* [article about them by Declan McCabe](#). And here's a [photo gallery of different species](#) from bugguide.net. Look for them while you can; as cold weather sets in, they're seeking out dry places to hibernate, often under bark.

We were delighted to find **snow buntings** eating weed seeds in a field overlooking the Connecticut River Valley. These birds of the arctic tundra commonly over-winter in southern Canada and the northern United States. Here's a [profile about them from Audubon](#), which notes that snow buntings have also been called "snowflakes" because of the way "they swirl through the air and then settle on winter fields." Our experience is that they're more easily disturbed by humans than many of our winter birds, so they're best observed by means of long-distance binoculars or a high magnification camera.

There are a number of creatures gathering **acorns**, and we keep finding **caches** – in a bird nest (see above), the knot of a tree, and, as in this photograph, under a log, which we suspect is the work of a mouse. Red oak acorns are more common in our region than less cold-hardy white

oaks, a fact that has both an up- and downside for wildlife. As noted in this [blog post from the National Wildlife Federation](#), white oak acorns contain less tannin (an astringent chemical) than red oak acorns, and are less bitter tasting and more easily digestible. Red oak acorns however tend to have more fat, protein and calories, and perhaps most importantly are good “keepers;” because they require cold stratification (chilling and moisture) to germinate, they are well-suited as stored winter provisions.

There are multiple species of what are loosely call **cup lichen** (also called trumpet, pixie cup, and goblet lichen), and it’s probably best just to enjoy their aesthetics instead of trying to discern among them. Members of the *Cladonia* genus, these lichens have evolved to use rainwater for reproduction. As noted by Jo Walewski in *Lichens of the North Woods*, “As rainwater splashes into the cup, vegetative structures or spores...are forcefully ejected...to a nearby spot, hopefully to grow into a new lichen body.”

We were surprised to learn that some **crabapples** are native to North America; however, you’re more likely to encounter a “feral” tree, descended from European cultivars. Whatever their origins, they’re great wildlife trees. See this [blog posting from the University of Maine Cooperative Extension](#), which includes an extensive chart of birds that use this small tree both for cover and food. As noted in the blog, many varieties of crabapple hold onto their fruit into winter, and the fruit becomes more palatable after thaw-freeze cycles. For this reason (like red oak acorns) crabapple fruit are valuable as a winter food source.

After most autumn foliage has passed us by, **tamaracks** blaze forth. Here’s an *Outside Story* [essay about these deciduous conifers](#), including an explanation of special features that allow them to grow in meager soils and extreme cold – all the way up to the edge of the arctic tundra. Tamaracks are champion recyclers, able to reabsorb perhaps 20 percent more nitrogen from their needles than other conifers, which means they can get by on a lower supply of nutrients for next year’s growth. Enjoy their bright yellow color while you can, a last bright flash in a fading season.

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