This Week in the Woods

November: Week Two

This Week in the Woods, we’re experiencing boomerang weather – a spate of warm days after snow. Now that most leaves are down, we’ve been noticing signs of **black knot**, a common and often fatal fungal parasite of cherry and plum trees. As noted by Lawrence Millman in *Fascinating Fungi of New*

England, the fungus has a two-year life cycle, in which "it elongates along the branch and encircles it," cutting off transmission of nutrients, and ultimately killing the branch. It releases spores in the second year, and the process starts all over again on other parts of the tree. Here's an iNaturalist page with additional images.

White-breasted nuthatches are bouncing around the trees, often in pairs, and in a near-constant state of yammering back and forth at chickadees (or maybe at the world; it's hard to tell). Unlike their red-breasted cousins, which often haunt conifers, these birds are more closely associated with deciduous trees – and more frequently show up at bird feeders. Here's a profile of them from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's "All About Birds" site, and here's an *Outside Story* essay by Joe Rankin, memorably comparing the nuthatch shape to a "stubby cigar" and noting white-breasted nuthatches' odd nesting habit of "painting" the edges of their cavity holes with smeared caterpillars. One other note about these birds – you may notice in cold months that they seem especially gluttonous as compared to other bird feeder visitors. The reason is that they're not immediately eating all the seeds that they take – they cache seeds under bark and in other hiding places for later retrieval.

Dainty **polypody fern** (two species) is more visible now. This tough little evergreen often grows on cliffs and rocky outcroppings. As noted in this post from the Virtual Nature Trail at Penn State New Kensington, the plant has limited value as a wildlife food source, although ruffed grouse, wild turkey and white-tail deer will feed on it.

Our region has an abundance of old sheep pasture, including areas with such depleted soils that it's challenging for many plants to get a foothold. **Reindeer lichen** (often called "reindeer moss") seems to thrive in these areas. This is not one lichen, but a group of related look-alikes, some of which serve as critical winter food for Santa's sleigh team. Reindeer, a.k.a. caribou, have special gut microorganisms that enable them to absorb nutrients from the lichen, which is indigestible for most wildlife. Here's a post about reindeer lichen from the Canadian site, borealforest.org.

It's courtship season for **hooded mergansers** ("hoodies"), although they won't mate until spring, and you may see them paired up together, swimming in local rivers and lakes. These pretty little ducks share many characteristics with wood ducks. They nest in tree cavities and man-made duck boxes, typically raise their young in forested wetlands, and – in common with woodies – are shameless "egg dumpers," meaning that the hens sneak their eggs in other hens' nests, in addition to raising their own broods. "Dumpees" may end up with surprisingly large broods, including mixed broods of both woodie and hoodie ducklings. Check out this famous photo of a mother hooded merganser with 50-plus ducklings, and see this *Outside Story* article by Michael Caduto, who notes that, as winters warm, these short-range migrants may find little reason to head south.

Every so often, we'll find the remains of a moth attached to a tree, sprouting weird fungal spikes. This is a "zombie moth," most likely infested by a **Cordyceps fungus**. Even by insect standards, it's a gruesome

fate. The fungus infects the moth and takes control of its movements. It directs the moth "zombie" to land on a tree (sited for optimal fungal spore distribution), and then goes about the business of turning its victim into a moth-shaped fungal sculpture. Here's a blog post by Pennsylvania's Cook Forest Conservancy, with an especially eye-catching photo of a moth's remains, and a link to a horror-movie-like National Geographic video documenting Cordyceps infections of ants and other invertebrates.

The rich brown seed heads of **dock** (multiple species) are easy to spot now in meadows, and they're a boon for birds and other wildlife. Species of this biennial weed are found around the world, and it has a rich cultural history – so, for example, some wild food foragers use it for flour, and it's also used for medicinal purposes by herbalists. Here's a species profile for **curly dock**, a common native species, from the Native Plant Trust.

We have pretty much despaired of identifying late season moths by species, especially as encounters take the form of tiny forms flitting up out of the leaf litter and almost immediately disappearing again. What these insects have in common is an ability to conserve energy and, therefore, make a living in temperatures that would kill most other lepidopterans. Here's an *Outside Story* essay by Bryan Pfeiffer describing how the common **Bruce spanworm** moth has low "wing-loading" and more muscle mass than summer moths, and how the species has divvied up its reproductive work in a way that conserves energy for the key task of egg laying; females don't bother growing wings. And here's an Outdoor Radio podcast produced by VPR in collaboration with the Vermont Center for Ecostudies, in which Kent McFarland and Sara Zahendra head out on a chilly day to find a male Bruce spanworm, and discuss how cold hardiness is a great adaptation to reduce bird predation.

In *The Illustrated Book of Trees*, author William Cary Grim dismisses **boxelder** as a commonly planted shade tree that is "rather inferior in decorative qualities." We disagree! And one reason is how it looks this time of year: in autumn, the trees – small members of the maple clan - produce thick clusters of samaras, which hang down from the stems in a way that is reminiscent of weeping willow boughs. In some light, they have a golden sheen. Those abundant seeds will also help to sustain wildlife as others foods grow scarce. Here's a profile from the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center.

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