December 2025

* * * NATURE NEWS * * *

THE HOW AND WHY OF CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNTS

National Audubon Society (now usually referred to as simply "Audubon") provides this history: Prior to the turn of the 20th century, hunters engaged in a holiday tradition known as the Christmas "Side Hunt." They would choose sides and go afield with their guns—whoever brought in the biggest pile of feathered (and furred) quarry won.

Conservation was in its beginning stages in that era, and many observers and scientists were becoming concerned about declining bird populations. Beginning on Christmas Day 1900, ornithologist Frank M. Chapman, an early officer in the then-nascent Audubon Society, proposed a new holiday tradition—a "Christmas Bird Census" that would count birds during the holidays rather than hunt them. So began the Christmas Bird Count. From December 14 through January 5 each year tens of thousands of volunteers throughout the Americas brave snow, wind, or rain, and take part in the effort. Audubon and other organizations use data collected in this long-running wildlife census to assess the health of bird populations, and to help guide conservation action.

If you're interested in joining this event, be assured that none of our local counts are held on the actual holiday! And there are various options for participation. If you live within a designated count area, you can count birds that visit your yard and feeding station(s). If you only have a few hours to spare, compilers are happy to include your sightings in the day's total. Participants may head out alone or be part of a team. Beginners are welcome and are matched with experienced birders.

To find out which towns are included in our local area circles, go to: **https://gis.audubon.org/christmasbirdcount/** and zoom in.

Contact a compiler (see below) for more information or to sign up.

WATER FOR BIRDS IN WINTER

Birds are attracted to water during winter months. Watch carefully and you'll notice that, while birds will bathe when temperatures hover above freezing, they aren't as inclined to take a dip when temperatures drop lower. They do, however, like to take a drink. Although seed-eaters are able to produce water internally through the process of cellular respiration, and other species will glean water from melting icicles or even by eating snow, a pool or puddle of unfrozen water will attract birds in winter.

This brings us to the topic of heated birdbaths and/or the use of devices that thaw frozen water in birdbaths. While providing wild birds with clean drinking water is helpful, providing a roomy bathing area that stays thawed even in severely-cold weather can be harmful in some cases. Consider that before heating devices came along, birds could bathe in naturally-melted water and be able to fly off without their feathers freezing. According to the blog *Cool Green Science-Stories of The Nature Conservancy*, birds bathing while air temperatures are frigid risk harm due to frozen feathers: **https://blog.nature.org/2022/01/31/should-you-provide-birds-water-in-winter/** The article suggests modifying heated birdbaths so that birds can safely drink, but not bathe. A metal heating element that keeps a small section of the birdbath thawed works well.

If you have birdfeeders or simple feeding stations, consider adding shallow, unbreakable containers around the area. Yes, it can be labor-intensive, but you can easily pour water into them (hot water when it's below freezing) and provide fresh water for at least a short period of time.* As a source of drinking water, the containers can be filled with pebbles that will form small pockets of water where birds can sip.

It simplifies matters somewhat if you purchase one of many types of heating devices that can be placed in birdbaths. But a labor of love is still involved in order to set up the device and manage the electrical connections. Birdbaths and saucers have to be refilled frequently and kept clean, too. But if enjoyment of winter months for you is linked to providing a safe and healthy haven for wild birds, you may want to add a winter water feature or two to your bird-feeding site.

***** *In our observations during winter months, we've noticed that birds frequently come for a drink of water from 2:30 - 3:30 p.m.*

WATCHING FOR SPARROWS IN WINTER

What are your chances of seeing these sparrows in central Worcester County in winter? Can you identify the most likely species you might spot during the coldest months?

WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW (Immature)

Not likely to be seen on the Worcester Plateau, but small numbers, often immature individuals, overwinter in eastern MA and along the Connecticut River Valley. Adult birds sport bright black-and-white head stripes.

LINCOLN'S SPARROW

Rare here in winter. Small numbers are found on the coast some years. These sparrows breed in Canada and the northern tier of the U.S. and migrate through Massachusetts on their way to the southern U.S. and Mexico.

CHIPPING SPARROW (fall plumage)

Rare to uncommon here in winter, with lone individuals popping up in various locations all over the state. In summer the plumage of this sparrow is much more striking, especially the bold rusty-colored cap contrasting with the bright white supercilium.

WHITE-THROATED SPARROW
(Right and below)

There are two forms of this species – tan-striped and white striped (pictured here). Markings on tan-striped individuals are less bold. [For more info on the two forms: **https://stevecreek.com/white-throated-sparrow-color-morphs-explained/**]
Seen here all winter, often frequenting birdfeeder areas where they forage for seeds on the ground. Numbers vary from year to year.

SWAMP SPARROW
Not impossible to see here in winter, but rare. Over-wintering individuals are found mostly in the Connecticut River Valley and in eastern MA.

SONG SPARROW
Found throughout our region all winter, although in reduced numbers compared to other seasons. One of our most abundant species.

SAVANNAH “IPSWICH” SPARROW

Very rare here any time of year. The Ipswich form--much paler than typical Savannahs, with bright white facial markings--breeds in coastal Nova Scotia and winters in coastal areas in northeastern North America. Take a photo if you spot this species in our region!
Doug Wipf took this photo at Wachusett Reservoir on November 5th.

SAVANNAH SPARROW

This species is around in small numbers most winters but often is undetected and/or misidentified. Take a closer look if you see a sparrow with a streaked breast that can easily be confused with Song Sparrow. It’s more likely to be found in weedy fields or hedgerows than at birdfeeders.

FOX SPARROW

Unmistakable in appearance, Fox Sparrows overwinter throughout Massachusetts in small numbers, migrating here from breeding grounds in northern Canada. They're occasionally seen feeding on the ground in yards with feeders, preferring locations with dense vegetation and brushy edges.

AMERICAN TREE SPARROW

Like Fox Sparrows, this species breeds in northern Canada and other far north regions, migrating southward for winter. This brightly-colored species can be found here in good numbers throughout the winter. They occur in shrubby wetlands, roadside hedgerows, and at backyard feeding stations.

VESPER SPARROW

Very rare in winter, generally migrating to the southern U.S. and Mexico. Lingerers may show up in agricultural areas with weedy edges and hedgerows. Grab your camera for a photo if you see this sparrow here during the winter months!

FIELD SPARROW

Uncommon-to-rare during the winter months, this is another species that occurs in small numbers throughout the winter. As with many of the unexpected species described above, a Field Sparrow sighting will flag as “rare” (requiring description and/or photo) if reported on eBird in January or February but will be accepted without explanation or documentation in December. Late migrant sparrows are more likely in December.

NATURE FOLKLORE QUIZ

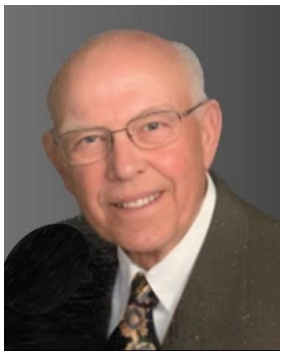
Woolly bear caterpillars, the larval forms of Isabella tiger moths that appear in the fall, have a reputation linked to forecasting the weather for the winter ahead. Yes, it has something to do with the two colors—black and rusty brown– that appear along its thirteen segments. Can you explain how the winter weather prediction is made according to the caterpillar’s appearance?

Answer at the end of the newsletter.

Woolly bear (Pyrrharctia Isabella) caterpillar
Hardwick, October 2025

* * * ANNOUNCEMENTS * * *

REMEMBERING DICK KNOWLTON



We are profoundly saddened to report that our friend and long-time member of both Ware River Nature Club (WRNC) and Forbush Bird Club (FBC), Dick Knowlton, passed away at his home in Gardner on November 10, 2025. Dick's knowledge of birds and wildlife was unsurpassed. Dick was an avid nature photographer, and he and his wife Peg loved birding all over the world. They served as volunteer caretakers of the Mass Audubon's Wachusett Meadow Wildlife Sanctuary in Princeton for 12 years. For nearly a decade, Dick organized and compiled the results of the Sanctuary's annual Breeding Bird Census, a FBC project. Besides serving as president of FBC from 2013 to 2019, Dick was part of WRNC's Advisory Group during the Club's early years. He was an enthusiastic participant in Christmas Bird Counts and led dozens of field trips, including whale-and-bird-watching excursions out of Gloucester. He rarely, if ever, missed important annual meetings of FBC and other organizations. We will miss Dick's companionship, wide breadth of experience, and leadership skills.

WRNC ANNUAL MEETING – FEBRUARY 2026

After the flurry of holiday activities has passed and January's slower pace gradually delivers us to the midpoint of winter -- halfway between the winter solstice and the spring equinox-- final plans for Ware River Nature Club's annual meeting will be brewing. Save the date: Sunday, February 22nd, and stay tuned for more details. Meanwhile, we are accepting donations of items for our fundraiser silent auction. Goods and services reflecting nature and/or outdoor themes make great donations, but we're happy to accept a variety of items. To make arrangements for pick-up, contact warerivernatureclub@yahoo.com . This is our only fundraiser, and we appreciate all contributions.

House Finch, Hardwick, November 24th
Photo by Alan Rawle

Snow Bunting at Wachusett Reservoir November 23rd
Photo by Doug Wipf

Red-breasted Nuthatch, Princeton, November 23rd
Photo by Alan Rawle

Red-winged Blackbird, October 16th, Worcester
Photo by Betty Jenewin

CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNTS

GROTON-OXBOW
Sunday, December 14
Compiler: Jon Skinner
(978-894-3698) jonrisk@gmail.com

ATHOL Saturday December 20
Compiler: David Small (978-413-1772) dave@atholbirdclub.org

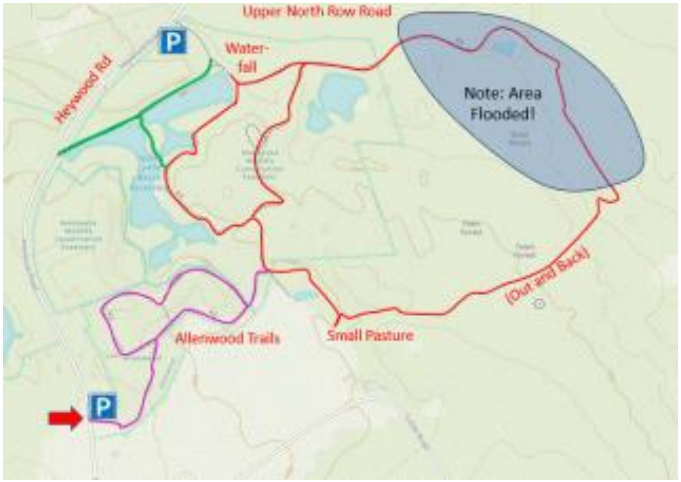
WORCESTER
Saturday December 20
Compiler: John Liller (508-877-5770)
stanager44@gmail.com
Snow/ice date Sunday, December 21

QUABBIN Saturday December 27
Compiler: Scott Surner
ssurner@aol.com

WESTMINSTER
Thursday, January 1, 2026
Compiler: Charles Caron
(978-944-2326.) caronenv@aol.com
Date subject to change depending on weather

Photo by Anne Greene

PRINCETON OPEN SPACE COMMITTEE - PRINCETON HIKES!



SENIOR HIKE in STERLING: LYNDE BASIN & WEKEPEKE

Wednesday December 17th 10 a.m.

This is an easy-to-moderate 3-4 mile hike through the Wekepeke Wildlife Conservation Area. The walk will start out through the woods via the Allenwood trails and return alongside the reservoirs.

HIKE AT HOG HILL (DCR KRISTOFF PROPERTY) STERLING

Saturday December 20th 9 a.m.

This hike will take participants around the Hog Hill loop at the old pig farm, with an extra spur off the loop, perhaps going out to Trout Brook Conservation Area. Return will be along the remainder of the loop trail. This is a moderately difficult hike of about 4 miles.

For more information or to register:
TrailaroundprincetonMA@gmail.com

FORBUSH BIRD CLUB

NEW YEAR'S BIRDS IN WORCESTER

Thursday January 1, 2026

Noon – late afternoon

Leader: John Shea
john@beachwells.com 508-667-1982

Start your bird list for the new year with Forbush Bird Club! Meet at the entrance to All Faiths Cemetery, 7 Island Road, Worcester. We will drive to additional locations within the city.

NATURE FOLKLORE QUIZ ANSWER

To learn more about the origin of the woolly bear theory and other interesting details, go to:

https://www.weather.gov/arx/woollybear


Nature shows us
the beauty of each season.
Happy
Winter Holidays!