



The Ferrum Nature Society Bulletin

Dedicated to the appreciation and conservation of our natural world

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Winter bird count:

The FNS annual winter bird count will take place on Saturday, December 8. Field or feeder bird counters are welcome. Send an e-mail if you are interested.



Nature's events:

Snow? This area averages 2.7 inches in December. Of course, we had none all winter last year!

Sky calendar:

Full moon - December 24th - the moon before Yule

Planets - Mars is very bright in the eastern sky this month. Venus is visible in the morning.

Geminid Meteor Shower

- peak is the night of December 13. Look in the eastern sky near the constellation Gemini. This spectacular meteor shower occurs near the dark of the moon. Dress warm!

Volume 5, Issue 12

December 2007

Our smallest woodpecker

Olivia Mendoza

The smallest of all species of woodpeckers in our area is the Downy Woodpecker (*Picoides pubescens*). It is 6-7 inches in length.

Downy Woodpeckers are common in North America from Alaska to Florida. This bird species can be found in a wide range of habitats from woodland forests to urban backyards and comes readily to bird feeders. Downy Woodpeckers tend to be larger in the north and at higher elevations, while they tend to be smaller in the south and at lower elevations.

Downy Woodpeckers are common members of winter mixed species foraging flocks. In a mixed flock, Downy Woodpeckers do not need to be as vigilant about looking for predators and are more successful at foraging. When Downys forage, they glean, probe, pry and tap to feed on insects in the stems of weeds and galls and in the bark of trees. The Downy woodpecker eats food resources that larger woodpeckers cannot, such as the smaller insect fauna of weed stems. Downy woodpeckers will attach themselves to goldenrod galls to eat the gall fly larvae. These woodpeckers prefer larger galls. When looking for food, the female and male divide the work.

Males and females may stay in the same area in the winter. Male Downy woodpeckers have a red patch on the back of their head. Female Downy Woodpeckers have a black patch on their head. Males feed on small braches and weed stems. Females feed on larger braches of trees. Males keep females from foraging in areas with a higher abundance of food. If the male is removed from a territory, the female moves to the more productive areas formerly dominated by the male.

Downys lay 3-8 white eggs about 3/4 x 1/2 inch in size in nests built in tree cavities. The incubation period is 12 days. At hatching, the birds are naked and helpless. Chicks leave the nest in 18-21 days.

Woodpeckers can pound wood for hours at a time, but their heads do not get hurt,

because their hard-pointed bill has a sharp edge to chip wood. The Downy Woodpecker has strong neck muscles which helps the brain from being injured by the pounding.

Downys have their toes arranged with two in the front and two in the back, unlike other birds that have three in front and only one in back. Woodpeckers need the extra toe in the back in order to grasp tree bark to support themselves.



Downy woodpeckers have extremely long and flexible tongues. There are also barbs on their tongues to extract insects from crevices in trees and other plants. The woodpeckers tongue stretches three times as long as its beak.

Downy Woodpeckers also have two very important types of feathers. The woodpecker's stiff tail feathers brace the bird while the woodpecker pecks away at a tree. The feather holds up the bird when the bird is pecking. Very small feathers cover the birds nostrils so when the woodpecker pecks sawdust and wood chips are prevented by the feathers from flying in the bird's face.

Virginia's only 'possum

Ryan Prunty

The Virginia Opossum is a very well known species throughout the Eastern United States. The scientific name of this species, *Didelphis virginiana*, means "double womb", referring to the opossum's secondary womb. There are four different species of opossum in the *Didelphis* genus, but only one is found throughout the U.S. This animal lives in woodlands mainly near water, but can also be found around farmland and residential areas. Opossums have gray fur and do not have any hair on their ears or tails. Their tails range from 13-21 inches long and are prehensile - used to wrap around objects such as trees. They weigh an average of 5 pounds for a male and 2 pounds for a female, but can grow up to 13 pounds.

Opossums live, on average, for only about 1-2 years and the oldest one yet recorded was three years. Opossums are omnivores eating mostly insects and animal/plant matter, such as grasshoppers, slugs, mice, frogs, snakes, bird eggs, corn, acorns, blackberries and carrion.

Opossums make up for their short lifespan by breeding prolifically. A female can have up to 17 young per litter and have 1-2 litters per year. These newborns are so small they can all fit into one teaspoon. They are born about 12 days after fertilization and crawl through the mother's fur to a pouch where they will spend the next 50-65 days attached to their mother's nipple. They are dependant on their mother for about 100 days until they are able to care for themselves.



Photo by Todd Fredericksen

Opossums are better at playing dead than any other animal. This is their defense mechanism. They open their mouth and start to drool with their eyes open to fool the predator because most predators do not eat dead animals. Actually, the Opossum is not really playing, it is scared to the point where it goes into a state of shock. Interestingly, they can play dead for up to six hours and when the predator goes away, it may take up to 20 minutes for them to be able to move again.

Partridgeberry

Nell Fredericksen



Partridgeberry (*Mitchella repens*) is a common low-growing tiny shrub found in our mountain forests. Because of its size it can go unnoticed, yet this time of year it is one of few plants that can really add a bit of color to the season. With the forests bare and brown, it is a thrill to get a glimpse of the bright red and green of this little plant.

Partridgeberry is an evergreen shrub with a low trailing or creeping growth pattern, rarely reaching a height of 2-3 inches off the ground. It is characterized by paired rounded leaves 1/2" or less in diameter with distinct white veining. Partridgeberry flowers from June through July with the ends of the branches having small paired trumpet-like pinkish white flowers with four petals each. Even though there are two flowers, they produce one single "fused" fruit containing many seeds from both flowers. If you look closely at the berry you will see two dimples that demonstrate this fused nature. These berries are bright scarlet and can be found nearly all year on the plants, but most abundantly at this time of year. These berries are edible, however, they are quite tasteless and full of small seeds. Personally, I think it looks more edible than it really is - such a bright juicy looking berry is truly a disappointment.

Partridgeberry has several other names including Winter Clover, Checkerberry, and Squaw Vine. It has a long history of medicinal use and was used mainly by Native Americans to aid in childbirth and relieve many uterine related symptoms. A salve made of the extract of the plant blended with cream is also used to relieve soreness from nursing a baby.