



## FRESHWATER

### FINISH YOUR HOLIDAY SHOPPING TODAY

The Minnesota Weatherguide Environment™ Calendar and Almanac makes a great gift for most everyone on your list. Plus, your purchase supports the work of Freshwater, which has been inspiring and empowering people to value and preserve water since 1968.

Order online at [freshwater.org](https://freshwater.org). It's a gift they will enjoy all year long.

When you're done shopping, step outside and take in the crisp December weather. Notice how snow and ice transforms our woods and waters this time of year, and listen for wintering birds like the black-capped chickadee or the downy woodpecker. Appreciate the beauty of our unique winter landscapes.

## DECEMBER PHENOLOGY

### Jim Gilbert's Nature Notes

#### First week of December

New ice cover on lakes can make sudden thundering, booming and cracking sounds as the ice expands or contracts with changing temperatures. The startling sounds do not necessarily mean that the ice is unsafe for skating or ice fishing. Black-capped chickadees need to eat their own weight (1/40 of a pound) in food every day during cold weather. They will sometimes take food from human hands and are especially fond of sunflower seeds. Red squirrels are active all winter. They prefer evergreen forests, which explains why they're far less abundant in southern Minnesota than in the north.

#### Second week of December

Screech owls often roost in wood duck houses. Gray squirrels and other animals also use these nesting boxes for winter shelter. Meanwhile, nearly all raccoons are sleeping in sheltered dens where they will remain until January or February. Ring-necked pheasants, wild turkeys and trumpeter swans are feeding in the stubble of harvested soybean and corn fields. The red fruit on sumacs, highbush cranberry shrubs and many varieties of crabapple trees is very colorful. Those who feed birds in north-central and northeastern Minnesota hope to see pine grosbeaks, evening grosbeaks, red-breasted nuthatches, gray jays and more at their feeding stations.

#### Third week of December

Chipmunks are awake, but they stay in their burrows and eat food they have stored for winter. Wintering mourning doves prefer millet and other seeds scattered on the ground at feeding stations.

December 2023, marked the 124th annual Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count. These citizen-science one-day counts — about two dozen of which occur in Minnesota — have helped researchers better document wild bird population trends over the years. On December 16, the Henderson area count centered on the Ney Nature Center, within a 15-mile circle. On this count, 55 observers counted 39 species and a total of 3,933 individual birds, including 12 pileated woodpeckers and 44 trumpeter swans. The next day, on December 17, the count in Minneapolis took place at the Robert's Bird Sanctuary near Lake Harriet, resulting in 38 species and 1,719 total birds counted by 32 observers. Highlights included 476 common mergansers, 266 Canada geese, 89 dark-eyed juncos, 53 wild turkeys, 29 blue jays, 22 downy woodpeckers and 9 American robins.

#### Fourth week of December

Sunlight now casts the longest shadows of the year, and the intensity is just one quarter of the maximum level we had back in June. This is the time when hundreds of Bohemian waxwings usually return to the Grand Marais area to feed on the bright red-orange fruit from native mountain ash trees.

*On December 24, 2023, southern Minnesota lakes were mostly wide open after being briefly ice-covered in late November. It was a brown Christmas Day for most of Minnesota and Wisconsin.*

#### Fifth week of December

Garden flower and vegetable seed packets are now on display in grocery stores. Seed and plant catalogs have been arriving in our mailboxes for a month. White-tailed deer browse on twigs of basswood, sugar maple, bur oak, red cedar, red-osier dogwood and more. They require six to eight pounds of twigs each day.

*In December 2023, 650 ships came to Duluth to finish up the shipping season. A sobering statistic — 2023 ended up being the warmest year worldwide on record, for both land and oceans.*

#### LOOK FOR ...



#### Freeze-up for Lake Minnetonka:

2023	Open to 1/13/24
2022	Dec. 8
2021	Dec. 8
2020	Dec. 24
2019	Dec. 2
2018	Nov. 28
2017	Dec. 14
2016	Dec. 15
2015	Dec. 31
2014	Nov. 27



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