

WINTER VISITORS FROM THE ARCTIC



The common redpoll, a five-inch, streaked gray and brown bird with a bright red cap, nests in the Arctic among birches and tundra shrubs. These birds are winter visitors in the northern and central part of Minnesota. We call it an invasion year when food is scarce in the far north and more of these winter finches move into Minnesota, including the far southern part. At feeding stations, common redpolls like a mixture of thistle and chips (small pieces of sunflower seeds) plus other small seeds and suet. During the winter, some common redpolls tunnel into the snow to stay warm on extra cold nights. Tunnels may be more than a foot long and four inches below the insulating snow.

FRESHWATER

INTRODUCING GREATER LAKES PROMISE

Freshwater, in an innovative 5-year project funded by the Great Lakes Protection fund, is partnering with several regional land trusts to help improve water quality through a new enterprise called “Greater Lakes Promise.” A primary goal is to restore select croplands to perennial vegetation, which reduces runoff and erosion while trapping carbon in the soil. Greater Lakes Promise focuses on the watersheds around key Great Lakes tributaries including the Maumee, Saginaw and St. Louis rivers. This work promises to lay a new foundation of clean water from healthy lands.

Learn more at greaterlakespromise.org.



GREATER LAKES
PROMISE

FEBRUARY PHENOLOGY

Jim Gilbert's Nature Notes

First week of February

Listen for the first house finches to begin singing their cheerful warbling songs – a musical sign of spring! Two other subtle early spring signs that are now happening include the bills of European starlings, which change from black to yellow for the nesting season. Male American goldfinches, brownish and grayish in winter, are also starting to show some bright yellow feathers.

On February 2, 2023, observers noted fewer ice fishing houses on Minnesota lakes. Many lakes had eight to 10 inches of good ice, but then heavy snowfalls came to insulate, and the weight of the snow caused water to come through cracks and holes in the ice, resulting in thick slush.

Around February 5, 2023, a three-day snowfall left 14 inches of new snow in the Twin Cities area. This brought the total to about 48 inches for the season; 20 inches would be normal. Some positives about the heavy snowpack: the snow on evergreen boughs was a beautiful sight and snowshoeing once again became a popular pastime.

Second week of February

The sun has moved higher in the sky, greenhouses become hot and humid and plants begin to grow. Migrating monarch butterflies from Minnesota and Wisconsin currently winter in a small forested area of the volcanic mountains in Michoacan, Mexico. The overwintering population registered a significant drop from the year 2023, as reported in a 2024 World Wildlife Fund survey. This is part of an unsettling long-term trend. Habitat for monarchs across North America is threatened by climate change and widespread herbicide use.

On February 12, 2024, the first garden plant to bloom each year – common snowdrop – began blooming at the University of Minnesota Landscape Arboretum; this was extremely early during the record-setting warm winter.

Third week of February

Pileated woodpeckers have become vocal with their loud spring flicker-like calls. Some bald eagles have begun their nesting season. Start looking for the first eastern chipmunk above ground; during the winter, they stay in underground burrows and wake up about every five days to eat the food they stored last fall. White-tailed deer bucks continue to shed their antlers. The sunlight now is as strong as it was in mid-October, and muddy country roads are common.

On February 22, 2024, early arriving sandhill cranes were observed at the Swan Lake area in Nicollet County.

Fourth week of February

Horned larks are often thought of as the earliest returning migrating birds in southern Minnesota.

When you drive on a rural gravel road, you may see small flocks of these little gray-brown birds foraging on the roadside, and flying up as your car passes by.

They are smaller than a robin but bigger than a house sparrow and have a brown tail with white outer feathers and small tufts of black feathers on each side of the head.

From Carlton to the North Shore of Lake Superior, migrating American crows are returning, as northern ravens look for nesting sites. Now to the end of February, we experience close to 11 hours of daylight – so nice!

The year 2024 was the warmest February on record for the state of Minnesota, featuring a very early start to the maple syrup season, and dozens of lake ice-outs in southern parts of the state.

February 23, 2024, was ice-out for both Iowa Lake and Sager Lake, located south of Fairmont. They both froze over January 1, so had less than two months of ice cover.

LOOK FOR ...



First active eastern chipmunk seen (Carver County):

2023	Feb. 9
2022	Mar. 2
2021	Feb. 23
2020	Mar. 1
2019	Mar. 8
2018	Mar. 1
2017	Feb. 21
2016	Feb. 25
2015	Feb. 22
2014	Feb. 22



LARRY PAULSON | BRIDGE OVER MINNEHAHA CREEK | MINNETONKA, MN

