

Natural Events
February
GSWA Ecological Restoration Site



Northern Cardinal



Great Horned Owl

- 1) Look at the variety of dried meadow plants at trail stop one. See if you can find the plant with the unusual ball-like growth half way up the main stem. This structure, called a gall, is nothing more than a cancerous growth elicited at the hands of a small fly. All galls are really just plant tumors that have formed in response to a chemical signal implanted by a vector insect. Once formed most galls act as a nursery for developing larvae. If you split open a goldenrod ball gall at this time of the year you will find (if a bird hasn't beat you to it) a white legless grub. In the spring the larvae will pupate and emerge as a fly about the size of a housefly – not unattractive either – this fly has gorgeous reddish-brown wings with white markings.
- 2) One of my favorite things to do at this time of the year is poke my head into the many blue bird boxes we have on site or even poke around in abandoned birds nests in the hedgerows. What you will eventually find is a few huddled white-footed mice seeking shelter from the bitter cold nights. Their nests are loosely clumped balls of plant fibers, grass remnants and dried leaves. I think white-footed mice would win the award for nature's cutest face. All mice are maligned for their ability to pass certain diseases throughout the ecosystems they inhabit but much of this is unfounded. While this can be true of populations gone awry most wild populations of small mammals have the necessary checks and balances that stabilize their numbers to acceptable levels. .
- 3) February is good time to explore the snug spaces between old bark and hardwood of dead or dying trees. These spaces can be place for a whole guild of arthropods to spend the winter. Look for signs of wood boring beetle larvae here with their distinctive tunneling that can often times look like a carved out centipede in the surface of the hardwood. If you see a fuzzy yellowish mound about two inches across this may very well be the egg case of the gypsy moth – the bane of eastern forests. A white tightly threaded silk cocoon may be the wintering egg case of the grass spider. Sometimes you may find a few dead ants – really they are just the dormant winter state of living carpenter ants. All these insects of course are what the woodpeckers, chickadees and nuthatches are on the hunt for. I always watch these birds with respect as they eek out a living on the bark of trees in the throws of their death.
- 4) Occasionally in the dead of winter nature can sometimes offer respite in the form of a warm spell. This is a good time to walk about and seeks signs of hope for the spring that is to follow. Look along our many ditches for a dancing array of fly-like creatures – this is in fact a crane fly – in all probability a species known as the winter crane fly. This species can be active all year but is easily noticed when nothing else is a stir. If you come across a patch of snow at the base of a tree and think someone dropped their pepper shaker, look again. The tiny specks of life are probably snow fleas – a primitive insect that belongs to the genus *Collembola*. These insects can cluster in herds of thousands.
- 5) We don't normally associate this month with love stricken songbirds but a few like to get a head start. The bright red cardinal, so common at our backyard feeder, will start to demarcate its territory with its eloquent clear whistle which ends abruptly with a “chip” or “tsip” as a sort of exclamation point. Chickadees and titmice will also start to claim areas for themselves using song rather than resorting violence as a means to an end.
- 6) Great horned owls nest in February, and as is often the case in the bird and mammal world, the rituals surrounding courtship and mating involve a certain amount of noise. Come visit this sight in the evening and you may be baptized in the five or six deep dog-like hoots of this magnificent denizen of our woodlands.