

Natural Events
December
GSWA Ecological Restoration Site

Red-bellied Woodpecker



Grey Squirrel in Snow



- 1) The earth this month is filled with the natural odor of Mother Nature’s exhale – it’s the piquant smell of decay. Those billions of microbes beneath your feet have been waiting all year for November’s bounty to fall from the sky. The soil is in a real sense of the word “alive”. The most abundant microorganisms in the soil are bacteria. All of the different species have specific roles to play – some will break down the tough cellulose material that make up plant fiber while others will break down the protein in worm tissue whose time has passed. Don’t you dare discount this group of unsung hero’s of the biological world. These guys are responsible for soil fertility and nitrogen fixation without which plants, animals and you would not exist. Humans have derived great benefits from soil bacteria, actinomycetes bacteria have produced some of the strongest antibiotics known to science. I just like them because walking in the woods; especially in December, they fill the air with their natural gases, letting me know the earth is still alive even at the edge of winter.
- 2) December is a month not totally devoid of life, on warmer days you may see an occasional chipmunk run about the forest floor in search of remnant nuts, seeds and dried berries. Chipmunks only partially hibernate in the winter during the coldest periods. Any temperature rise above forty degrees can rouse a chipmunk from his nap. I’ve seen male chipmunks chase each other in the dead of winter anticipating a time when courting females will be on their mind.
- 3) One of my favorite December remnants is the spore case of a fern that stand-up like the bodies of toy soldiers. If you walk along the blue trail next to the Silver brook you can find them looking like some obscure weed. These are the reproductive beginnings of sensitive ferns (*Onoclea sensibilis*) anatomy. If you shake these structures a brown dust will travel with the wind. When they reach the ground in a desirable location they will form a heart-shaped leaf. This little plant will then reproduce sexually where sperm and egg come together which will then sprout into the fern we all have come know, thus completing its life cycle.
- 4) Teasel forms an exciting design that grace the entrance to our restoration site. It is the tall spiky-looking plant that you see at the edge of our neighbors grass whose geometric dried flower head never ceases to evade my camera’s shutter. Dried plant arrangers love this plant as a fall centerpiece for their Thanksgiving tables. Amazingly this European import was used in the wool industry to card or *tease* wool – giving the plant its common name.
- 5) Our property hosts some of the most beautiful shelf fungi on the east coast – *Fomes fomentarius* found commonly on beech, birch and poplar is a crusty shard conk with shades of light and dark gray. Shelf fungi, if you haven’t figured it out, grow on dead and living trees extending prominently from the bark somewhere up their length. *Ganoderma applanatum*, commonly referred to as the artist conk is a large shelf fungus that grow 2 feet in diameter and live for up to fifty years. You’ll find these mushrooms on oak trees. The undersurface of this fungus is white and if you scratch it turns brown. Some people have scratched whole drawings onto this surface and sold them as nature craft – some of these pieces are true works of art.
- 6) My favorite bird this time of the year is the nuthatch. If you run into its territory it might scream a maniacal “ank-ank-ank!!” at you. These little wind-up-toys glean the bark of trees for wintering insects and beetle larvae. The main food at this time of the year is nuts, acorns, and cherry-pits.
- 7) Another common winter bird that always seems to hang out with the nuthatch is the chickadee. This tiniest of birds, the chickadee plays an important role in winter by gleaning under bark, dried seed heads, and pine cones in a tireless effort to find and consume the larvae of insects.