

Natural Events

November

GSWA Ecological Restoration Site

Downy Woodpecker Male



Chipmunk and Acorn



- 1) The last remaining remnants of Fall color paste the landscape in November as a warning that the season will soon come to a close. By now the leaves of ash, hickory and most maples have fallen while oaks and beech linger awhile longer. Don't be disheartened by the falling of leaves. This "abscission" as scientists call it, marks a windfall for the readily abundant microorganisms found in the soil. During the process of decomposition these microbes free up minerals and nutrients, which seep into the soil and are reabsorbed by the trees. This is nature's way of recycling and balancing the energy budget of our woodlands.
- 2) By now two of my favorite avian buddies have returned from vacation to "warm-up" in New Jersey's balmy winter climate - the white-throated sparrow (*Zonotrichia albicollis*) and Slate-colored Junco (*Junco hyemalis*). These two species are easily seen and identified at backyard feeders but nothing seems so natural then when they return from their boreal forest breeding grounds to forage in loose flocks amongst the brush and thickets of our native woodlands. Look for them along the ditch banks in the underbrush and in the small meadow at the start of the trail. Another avian visitor - the golden-crowned kinglet is often seen in November - these boreal visitors from the northlands have no fear of people and can snatch small midges and insects from branches right before your eyes. The common avian denizens become more prevalent as they look to humans for handouts of seed at bird feeders - the downy woodpecker shown above is a good example of a regular bird seed forager.
- 3) If you make it to trail stop number 9 take a good look at a very common plant that is easily identified by its dried brown floral "sausage" and know that you're looking at the familiar cattail (*Typha sp.*). This plant has colonized the area surrounding and demarcating the boundary line of a small pond. In the vernacular of my youth we would call the dried flower spikes "punks" and sometimes even burn them to keep the bugs away. If ever there was a plant that could save your life, lost in the wilderness, it would be the cattail. Nearly every portion of the plant - young shoots, immature flower spikes, pollen, rootstocks (especially nutritious), and young sprouts have some degree of nutritional content. The famous outdoor survivalist Euell Gibbons once coined the cattail, "the supermarket of the swamp."
- 4) In almost any opening or clearing on our restoration site you'll find the fluffy round remnant flower heads of aster - a common, often overlooked family of plants known for their fall beauty. Like dandelions the flower head produces a feathery *pappus* that with help from wind, parachute their 1-seeded *achene* for a distance from the parent plant. This group of plants gives botanists fits when it comes to identification. A big problem deals with hybridization. Using a good field guide like "Newcomb's *Guide to Wildflowers*" will help but I find the need to refer to many wildflower guides before I speak definitively about a species from this genera.
- 5) Late this month the leaves will meet their final destination turning my attention to other signs of life past and present in the woods. The tracks of nocturnal mammals have plastered their prints in the muddy banks of the Silver Brook and ditches. On any given day one can see the muddy imprints of raccoon, possums, herons, ducks, turtle and of course the white tailed deer along these watercourses. For all the time I spend out on this property it always amazes me to find the shaggy remains of bird nests dotting the hedgerows and thickets - "how did I miss them in spring", I wonder. It is a testimony to the secret lives of songbirds and how stealthy are their survival skills. If you are really curious to the species that made the nest there is a great Peterson field guide appropriately titled, "*A Field Guide to Bird Nests*."
- 6) I sometimes refer to November and March as the "Dreary" months. Ecologically they are just transitional months that usher in a totally different dynamic, the former where the life history of animals are thrust under the pressures of survival, the latter where recovery and rebirth start the process anew. November to me is a unique time to really appreciate the will and adaptability of plants and animals to exist while showing off their skills forged over the millennia of evolutionary time that brought them here.