

Wild Times at Pine Hill Park

Winter 2016/2017 Summary

The first official day of Winter in 2016, found a forest covered in a few inches of snow and Rocky Pond completely frozen over with the exception of a small area around the East side Beaver Den. The forest was very quiet. In fact, on my walk from the trailhead to Rocky Pond and back, I did not hear or see a single bird or mammal.

The last week of December saw a general warming trend with Rocky Pond covered with a thin layer of water, trails noticeably wet, and streams gently flowing. Loose associations of black-capped chickadees, tufted titmouse, white-breasted nuthatches, and downy woodpeckers could be seen, with gray squirrels scurrying throughout trees. One particular gray squirrel was making a descending “whining” noise, something I had never heard before. Looked around but could not figure out what association the call might have had with its surroundings.

On the last 2 days of December, temperatures starting dropping once again, Rocky and Muddy Ponds were frozen over, up to 6 inches of snow covered the ground near the ponds, and fox, deer, and coyote tracks were a common sight. A single beaver was seen in the water near its East side den chewing on some of the limbs it had recently stored for winter food. It then proceeded to life itself up upon the edge of the ice surrounding its den, causing the ice to break off. It continued to do this for about half an hour. It appeared it was the beaver’s way of helping to keep the area around the den free of ice. A red-tailed hawk was seen perched in a tree on the last day of 2016.

The first week of January found crows flying overhead, and to my surprise, a flock of 6 Eastern bluebirds near the border of the park and golf course. I only saw them that one day. Many food caches had been dug up by gray squirrels, lots of deer and fox tracks could be seen in the snow, and ground pine clubmosses were seen emerging from the snow. Bitter cold temperatures fell upon the forest, causing the open spaces around the Rocky Pond beaver den to freeze over. Crows, hairy and pileated woodpeckers, and white-breasted nuthatches were also seen.

On Jan. 10th, a bitter cold, breezy day caused the trees to sway back and forth, filling the forest with the sounds of cracks, squeaks, and moans. Had wished I could have recorded the sound of the forest that day. The only birds I saw that day were cardinals and crows.

Mid-Jan. found hairy woodpeckers drumming, signaling the start of their territory establishment behavior, a forest mostly devoid of snow, a few small areas of open water on Rocky Pond, and a variety of noises coming from beneath the Rocky Pond ice. Mostly “moans and booms”. You could even hear waves of under ice water sloshing up against the ice. A very enchanting time to be sitting next to Rocky Pond.

Towards the end of Jan., the forest continued to be very quiet, snow was mostly gone, and only a few patches of ice remained on Rocky Pond. Lots of signs of recent beaver feeding on the shores of Rocky Pond. On Jan. 27th, about an inch of snow covered the forest, Rocky Pond had refrozen for the most part and gray squirrels were a common sight on the upper Giorgetti trail. Black-capped chickadees, crows, white-breasted nuthatches, and drumming hairy woodpeckers were the only birds seen.

The first week of February was very cold, with the park covered in a few inches of snow. Tufted titmouse could be heard singing their “peter, peter, peter” song, and black-capped chickadees could be heard singing their “fee bee” song. Rocky Pond frozen over with the exception of a small area around the East side beaver den.

By mid-February, 8 inches of snow covered the forest, snow fleas were a common sight at the base of many trees, and robins were seen around town. Pictures of bobcat tracks started to come in to me from trail bikers Shelley and Lauren. More on that subject in the weeks and months ahead. A dramatic warming occurred at this time, and though Rocky Pond was frozen over, sub-ice rumblings could be heard as the ice was shifting and moving.

The third week of February found trails icy and treacherous, loose associations of black-capped chickadees, tufted titmouse, hairy woodpeckers and white-breasted nuthatches. Muddy Pond completely frozen over, and a very small area of open water near the beaver den on Rocky Pond.

The last week of February saw record high temperatures, the snow mostly gone, Cardinals singing, tufted titmouse calling, hairy woodpeckers fighting over territory and mates, Canada geese flying north overhead, and mourning doves “cooing” at Rocky Pond. You had the feeling that winter had loosened its grip of the land. It was one of those days you could “smell” the forest floor.

They say that if you have a mild Feb., you’re going to have a harsh March. That certainly happened this year. March came in with bitter cold temperatures, and the forest was once again filled with trees making “popping and cracking” sounds, as they swayed in the north winds. On March 3rd, I saw only one bird, a pileated woodpecker on my 2 hour hike.

On March 12th, temperatures were still bitter cold. Both ponds were completely iced over, and forest birds were still only those commonly involved with loose associations.

On March 14th and 15th, a major snow storm hit the area, with about 18 inches of snow falling on Pine Hill Park.

Spring is now here. Go out and enjoy the beauty of Pine Hill Park, watch for southern migrants beginning to enter the area, mammals becoming more visible, trees budding, wildflowers starting to appear, the ponds losing their ice, and peepers starting to be heard. Please stay on the trails, and enjoy your time in the park.