

LIVING

Short, chill days of December

Winter sets in, the solstice arrives and you can track nature’s changes

As we brace for the frenzy of the holiday season, it’s easy to forget that the winter solstice, a deeply mystical celestial event, takes place this month.

The solstice connects us to the very origin of much of human spirituality. Just when the late fall days have become painfully short and the sun seems to be on the brink of vanishing completely, the decrease in the hours of daylight suddenly stops. Instead of rising and setting a little further south each day, the sun abruptly halts its southward march and appears to “stand still” – the meaning of the word solstice – before proceeding to move northward once again. After Dec. 21 it will rise and set further and further north each day and climb higher and higher into the sky. This, of course, will provide increasingly longer days for the next six months.



Drew Monkman
OUR CHANGING SEASONS

The events in nature and the night sky that are listed below are typical of an average December in the Kawarthas. Some events occur over the entire month while others are more restricted in time. Try to take some time this December to get outside and appreciate a little of what the natural world has to offer.

- 1. Almost all migratory birds that breed in the Kawarthas are now on their wintering grounds. The eastern phoebes that may have nested at your cottage last spring are probably in northern Florida or central Texas, while the Baltimore orioles that came to your nectar feeder are busy making a winter living somewhere between southern Mexico and northern Colombia.
- 2. Light snow on early winter ice produces a wonderful slate on which mammal tracks are written. Watch for mink tracks along the shores of lakes, rivers, and wetlands. The tracks are one to two inches long and show five toes on both the front and back feet. Sometimes only four of the front toes are visible, however.
- 3. Look for Jupiter’s commanding presence in the southern sky just after sunset. It is by far the brightest star-like object visible. By steadying yourself against a tree with a good pair of binoculars, you should be able to see Jupiter’s four brightest moons close by.
- 4. Gray squirrels are often seen high up in city maple trees feeding on the keys. Although we do have some gray individuals in Peterborough, nearly all gray squirrels in southern and central Ontario are the melanistic (black) form. The town of Exeter, just north of London, is actually home to a white colony of gray squirrels. They are

not albino, however, because their eyes are dark.

- 5. If you’re already looking forward to spring greenery, why not learn to identify trees by their buds? Our deciduous trees have had fully formed buds since last summer. A good starting point is to learn to recognize the difference between alternate and opposite bud arrangements. Ash and maple are our only large trees with buds growing opposite each other.
- 6. Almost every winter, large flocks of bohemian waxwings turn up in the Kawarthas, usually starting in December.
- 7. According to Ron Pittaway of the Ontario Field Ornithologists, redpolls should be plentiful in southern and central Ontario this winter. They will be attracted to the good birch seed crops on native white birch and European white birch.
- 8. Birders often head down to Niagara Falls in early December. The entire Niagara River corridor is internationally recognized as a "Globally Significant Important Bird Area" since it has the largest and most diverse concentration of gulls in the world. This is also the closest area to Peterborough where you can see the tufted titmouse. Try Thomas St. in Chippawa.
- 9. Each winter, the Kawarthas hosts a small number of northern shrikes that have traveled from their summer haunts in the Arctic. These robin-sized birds typically perch at the very top of a tree or shrub, making them easy to spot. Their scientific name, *Lanius excubitor*, means “butcher watchman,” an appropriate name for this capable and alert predator of mice and small birds.
- 10. Deer carcasses and overwintering ducks are an important source of food for bald eagles that spend the winter in the Kawarthas. Watch for them along the Otonabee River and in the area of Jack, Katchewanooka, Buckhorn, and Stony lakes. Eagles are sometimes seen sitting on the ice beside open water, perched in nearby trees, or soaring overhead.
- 11. Robins should be quite plentiful. The wild fruits that constitute the robin’s winter diet – grape, mountain-ash, buckthorn, hawthorn, etc. – are quite abundant this year, so a lot of these birds will probably stay.
- 12. In early December, the easily identifiable constellation Cassiopeia looms like a big letter “M” in the north sky in the evening. The Inuit imagined the shape as a pattern of stairs sculpted in the snow.
- 13. The early morning hours of today and tomorrow will be the peak viewing days for the Geminids meteor shower.
- 14. With its symmetrical shape, long-lasting needles, and wonderful fra-



Bare branches etch patterns on a colourful winter sunset . . . something that will be happening earlier as the solstice nears. Special to The Examiner

grance, balsam fir makes a wonderful Christmas tree.

- 15. On average, December temperatures are only slightly milder than January and February locally. The daily maximum averages -1C and the minimum -10C.
- 16. The number and variety of birds coming to your backyard feeder may have decreased since the heady days of October. White-throated and white-crowned sparrows are now on their wintering grounds in the U.S. Some – but not all – of our cardinals have now joined winter flocks and moved on. Birds love lots of cover, so planting evergreen trees and shrub near the feeders will help attract more customers.
- 17. Pregnant adult queen wasps overwinter in crevices in rocks and wood. You may inadvertently bring one into the house, tucked away in a piece of firewood.
- 18. “Nip twigs” on the ground below conifers are a sure sign of red squirrel activity
- 21. Between mid-December and early January, Christmas Bird Counts take place across North and Central America. The Peterborough area count is today, Dec. 19, while the Petroglyphs count will be Monday, Dec. 27. Newcomers to the area, and newcomers to birding, are welcome to participate. Contact Tony Bigg at tanddbigg@sympatico.com or phone 652-7541.



Bald eagle

- 20. Skunks may emerge from their winter slumber to search for food during mild spells.
- 21. Today marks the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. At precisely 6:38 p.m. winter begins in the Northern Hemisphere. Today, the sun rises and sets at its southernmost points. Sunrise is not until 7:46 a.m., while sunset is upon us by 4:37 p.m. This translates to only eight hours and 51 minutes of daylight.
- 22. Winter is a good time to look at the many different shelf fungi that grow out flat from tree trunks. Three common species are the artist fungus, horse hoof fungus, and birch polypore fungus.
- 23. Our near-resident flocks of “giant” Canada geese depart when snow and ice cover their feeding and roosting areas around Peterborough. Most move south to the United States, some as far as Tennessee.
- 24. This is a great month to learn to identify our conifers. Pine needles are long; spruce needles are pointed and sharp; balsam fir and hemlock needles are flat and blunt; and cedar foliage is flat and scale-like.
- 25. The red of the poinsettia is not actually a flower but rather a colourful whorl of modified leaves called bracts. The actual poinsettia flower is small, green or yellow in colour and situated in the middle of the bracts. The flowers

actually resemble little vases

- 26. In the southeast night sky, look for the Winter Six: Orion, Taurus, Auriga, Canis Major and Canis Minor. The winter constellations shine brightly and are easy to pick out.
- 27. Take a drive along River Rd. north to Lakefield to look for ducks such as goldeneyes and mergansers. Keep an eye open for otters and eagles, too.
- 28. The red squirrel’s coat is now a brilliant russet. It is also much thicker than the summer coat.
- 29. Check out the twigs of small, shrubby willow trees for growths that look like pine cones. These are willow-cone galls. They are the tree’s response to eggs deposited last summer by gnats in the terminal buds. Gnat larvae are hibernating deep inside the gall.
- 30. Look for mullein stalks in old fields and along roadsides. If you check under the woolly leaves, you may find hibernating insects such as ladybugs.
- 31. Even though the days slowly grow longer after the winter solstice, the increase in daylight is in the afternoon, not in the morning.

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Red squirrel