

Winter’s bracing bite subdued

Climate change alters pattern of our coldest month, but there is plenty to enjoy

“There are two seasonal diversions that can ease the bite of any winter. One is the January thaw. The other is the seed catalogues.”

Hal Borland

Although just about everyone appreciates the so-called January thaw, I’m not sure we all feel comfortable with the near-permanent thaw and lack of snow we’ve seen so far this winter. But, we shouldn’t be surprised. The concentrations of the three main greenhouse gases linked to global warming reached their highest-ever levels in 2010. In addition, the U.S. has just experienced its second warmest summer on record while the amount of Arctic ice was at its lowest level on record. This trend of diminishing ice is a clear reflection of a steady increase in the planet’s temperature.



Drew Monkman
OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Clearly, climate change is making it increasingly difficult to talk about what an “average” January – or any other month, for that matter – looks like. The unexpected seems to be the norm these days, be it temperature, precipitation or the intensity of storms. What January 2012 will bring us is anyone’s guess. With that caveat, the events listed below are typical of January in the Kawarthas. Many events, of course, occur over the entire month and are not limited to any specific date.

- 1 – We begin the month with about 8 ¾ hours of daylight but gain a full hour by month’s end.
- 2 – Some birds can actually adjust their internal body temperature downward on cold nights. This serves to reduce the difference between the bird’s body temperature and the air temperature, thus reducing heat loss. Less shivering is necessary and fat reserves are used up at a lower rate. A chickadee, for instance, can lower its core temperature from 42C to 30C during a long, frigid January night. The bird actually enters a state of torpor and becomes temporarily unconscious.
- 3 – The numbers of some winter birds fluctuate widely from year to year. These species are referred to as winter “irruptives,” and the years in which they are particularly common are called “flight years.” Large numbers of American goldfinches are present this year, along with lesser numbers of pine siskins. Some bohemian waxwings have also been reported.
- 4 – Barred owls will occasionally show up in rural backyards and prey on careless feeder birds or on mice attracted by night to fallen seeds under the feeder. This round-headed, hornless owl often stays for days at a time and can be quite tame.
- 5 – Rarities and stragglers that have “forgotten” to migrate south or have become disoriented during migration sometimes show up at this time of year. A European duck known as a smew was observed by hundreds of birders in Whitby Harbour over the Christmas holidays.
- 6 – Bald eagles can sometimes be seen on Lake Katchewanooka, in the area of Petroglyphs Provincial Park and along the Otonabee River. At least three



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KARL EGRESSY Special to The Examiner

Tiny black bear cubs (top) the size of chipmunks are born in January, while monarch butterflies are wintering in Mexico. Abundant grapes and berries have convinced many robins to stay in the Peterborough area this January.

- eagles have been recorded in the Lakefield area in recent days.
- 7 – Watch for small numbers of common goldeneyes, common mergansers, and black ducks all winter long on the Otonabee River between Rice Lake and Lakefield. Some birds can usually be seen at Young’s Point, as well.
 - 8 – Small flocks of American robins overwinter each year. When the wild fruits – grape, mountain-ash, buckthorn, among others – that constitute the bird’s winter diet are abundant, the number of winter robins increases greatly. The number of robins present this winter is much higher than usual.
 - 9 – The early winter full moon (tonight) rides higher in the sky than at any other season and passes nearly overhead at midnight. Coupled with the reflective quality of snow, moonlit winter nights shine with an unforgettable brilliance. It’s a great time to go for a walk.
 - 10 – Cougars are turning up with increased frequency in Ontario. Nearly 1,000 sightings have been reported since 2002, many of them seen in early winter. The origin of these cats is still unclear, however. With at least 500,000 deer in Ontario there is certainly a sufficiently large prey base here for cougars to survive. Should you see a cougar, please contact the Ontario Puma Foundation or the MNR.
 - 11 – Moose and white-tailed deer usually shed their antlers sometime between early January and early March.

- This shows that the antler’s role as a tool of defense is minimal, since predators such as wolves pose the greatest threat during the winter months – well after the antlers have fallen.
- 12 – The daytime winter sky rarely appears as blue as the sky of summer. On cold winter days, invisible ice particles can easily form and scatter light of all wavelengths (colours), thereby making the sky appear almost white.
 - 13 – Because there are no plants in bloom, an absence of strong smells is a characteristic feature of winter. However, our noses still know the season by the smell of everything from the smoke from a wood stove to cross-country ski wax.
 - 14 – Mice, shrews, voles and moles remain active all winter long, as they make a living in the sub-nivean space between the earth and snow. Little do these mammals know, however, that owls can hear them moving under the snow. They are especially vulnerable to owls when in the vicinity of “ventilator shafts” that are constructed to allow in fresh air when carbon dioxide levels become too high.
 - 15 – Both Jupiter and Venus can be seen in the evening sky this month. Venus appears low in the west. They are much brighter than any of the stars.
 - 16 – There is a great deal of variability in fish behaviour in the winter. Some species, such as bass, can be relatively dormant, while others, such as northern pike and walleye, are active and continue to feed.

- 17 – Coyotes are quite vocal in the evening and at night during their January to March mating season.
- 18 – On mild winter days when the temperature climbs above 4C, bats sometimes emerge from hibernation and take “cleansing flights” to get rid of bodily wastes and to drink. However, bats may also appear in mid-winter because they are infected with white-nose syndrome, a disease which has now been detected at a hibernating site in the Bancroft area. If you see bats flying during the daytime in winter, or you see dead bats, please contact the Natural Resources Information Centre at 1-800-667-1940.
- 19 – As lake ice grows and expands, stresses are created which cause the ice to crack. The noise created can be surprisingly loud. Cracking is most frequent during periods of very cold weather.
- 20 – Under the frozen surface of ponds, countless immature insects – larvae and nymphs – remain active all winter. These include fierce, carnivorous dragonfly nymphs whose lower “lip” shoots out to snag prey almost like a frog tongue snatching flies, and the ingenious larvae of the caddisfly that use bits of plants and gravel to construct protective cases around their bodies.
- 21 – We are now becoming aware of the lengthening days. Most of the daylight is gained at the end of the day, rather than in the morning. Over the first three weeks of the month, we gain

- about 24 minutes more daylight in the afternoon, compared to only about 7 extra minutes in the morning.
- 22 – Warmer weather that sometimes arrives late in the month, usually between Jan. 20 and 26, is known as the January thaw. It has always held a prominent place in North American weather lore, almost akin to Indian summer. It does not, however, occur every year.
 - 23 – The monarch butterflies that migrated south in late August and September are now over-wintering on 12 isolated mountain tops of the Sierra Madre Mountains, west of Mexico City in the state of Michoacán. Although the latest census numbers have yet to be released, the size of the overwintering population is expected to be the lowest ever.
 - 24 – Winter trees and shrubs present a surprisingly wide and attractive spectrum of colours. Conifers, for example, are a study in the various greens. These include the yellow-green of white pine and the blue-green of white spruce.
 - 25 – Twigs and buds merit special attention at this time of year. Because their characteristics are different for each species of tree, buds are a very useful tool in winter tree identification. Honeysuckle, ash, maple, lilac, viburnum, elderberry and dogwood are the principal tree and shrub genera with opposite leaves and buds. Just about all of the others are alternate.
 - 26 – Bright stars abound in the winter sky. In fact, 17 of the 33 brightest stars visible in Canada are all clustered together right now in about 1/10th of the sky. They belong to a group of constellations called the “Winter Six,” namely Orion, Canis Major, Canis Minor, Gemini, Auriga, and Taurus.
 - 27 – With mating season starting, red foxes become more active. It’s quite common to spot their straight-lined trails, even in suburban backyards.
 - 28 – In January, black bears give birth to cubs no larger than chipmunks. Generally, two cubs are born, although there are sometimes as many as four or five. The amount of food available in the fall is critical in determining the number of young in the litter, or if the sow will give birth at all.
 - 29 – Anglers pursue a variety of species in winter including walleye, yellow perch, northern pike, whitefish, burbot, lake trout, brook trout, splake and rainbow trout. Central Ontario offers numerous ice fishing opportunities. Fishing is often best just after ice-up and then again at the end of the season.
 - 30 – This is usually the coldest month of the year in Peterborough with an average daily maximum of about -4C and a minimum of -13C. Snowfall averages about 39 cm.
 - 31 – White spruce cones retain large quantities of ripe seed over the winter. This makes the white spruce a favourite food source of winter finches such as white-winged crossbills. This species is present in the northern Kawarthas in small numbers this year.

Drew Monkman is a Peterborough teacher and author of *Nature’s Year in the Kawarthas*. He can be reached at dmonkman1@cogeco.ca. Visit his website and see past columns at www.drew-monkman.com.

Karl Egressy is a Guelph nature photographer. To see more of his work and to contact him, go to www.kegressy.com.