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LIVING

Red squirrel's coat a brilliant russet; Venus easily visible in evening sky

December delights

Set to embark on month of enchantment

With December's cold now upon us, much of the natural world has entered a period of relative dormancy.

This is certainly not the case for humankind, however, caught up as we are in the frenzy of the holiday season. Not surprisingly, we often forget that a mystic celestial event takes place this month. For this is the time of the winter solstice — the shortest day of the year — and the first official day of winter.



OUR CHANGING SEASONS
Drew Monkman

The half-hearted sun casts a cold, pale light as it traces its lowest and shortest trajectory of the year through the southern sky.

With nights as long as June days, it's no wonder that the ancients feared the sun's disappearance.

But, just when the sun seems to be on the brink of vanishing, it suddenly stops its southward march and essentially "stands still," hence the word solstice.

It will then proceed to move northward once again, to climb higher and higher into the sky and to provide longer and longer days for the next six months. So it was with great joy and relief that ancient cultures on every continent celebrated this life-affirming event, an event that may even have been a precursor to faith.

A Christmas tree, too, proclaims life's vigour in the face of winter. It fills our homes with the resinous fragrance of the northern forest and is often the centrepiece of our holiday decorations.

The natural world provides many other Yuletide adornments, as well: festive winterberry holly fruits, radiant cardinals at our feeders, fluffy chickadee baubles, hoar-frosted windows, and shimmering icicles.

The events listed below are typical of an average December in the Kawarthas.

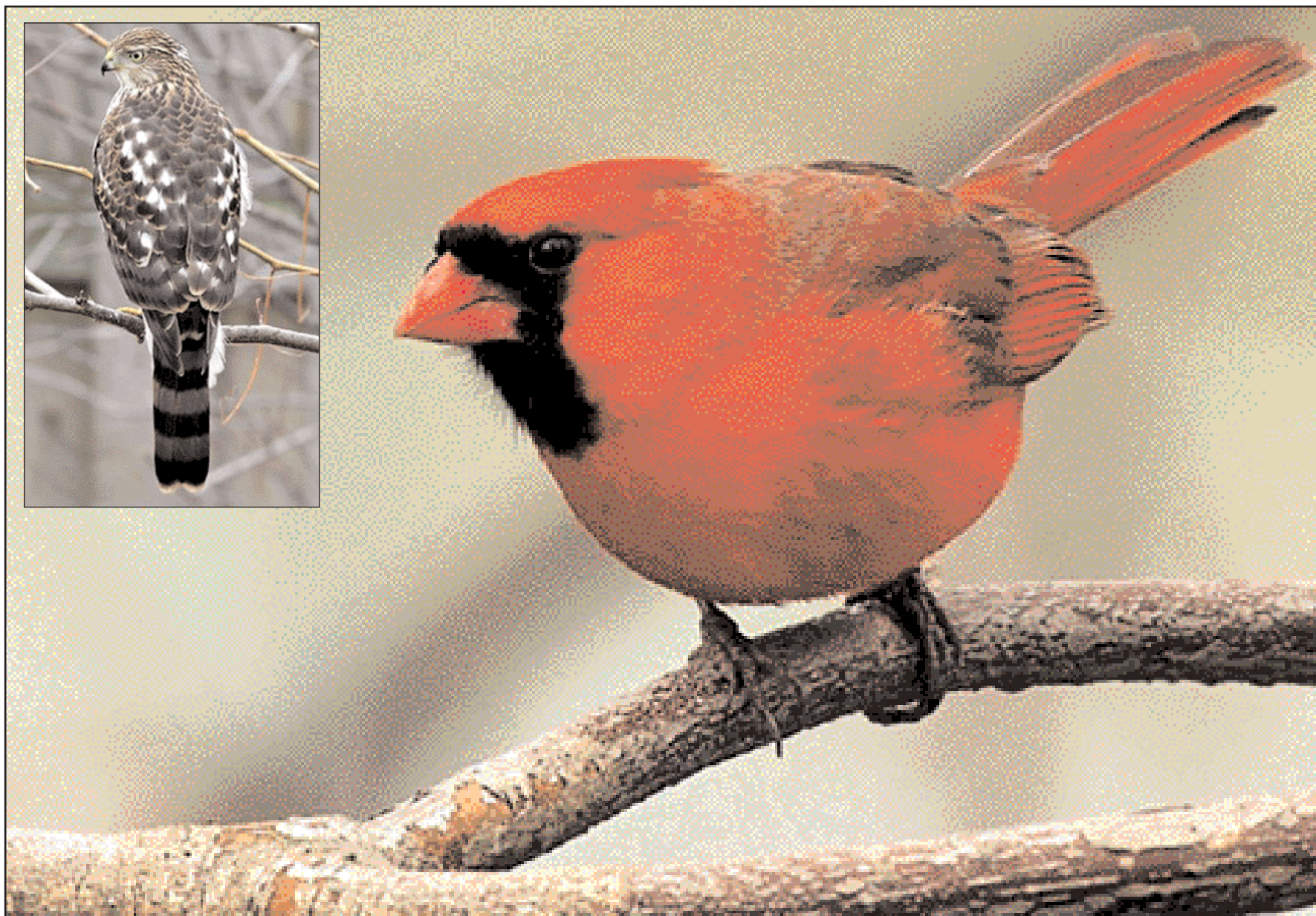
The dates are only an approximation.

Some occur over the entire month while others are more restricted in time. Many are dependent on the vagaries of the weather.

1. Almost all migratory birds that breed in the Kawarthas are now on their wintering grounds. Large numbers of robins spend the winter in South Carolina, most hummingbirds choose the Yucatan Peninsula, while Baltimore orioles fly to Costa Rica.

2. Throughout the late fall and winter, gray squirrels are often seen high up in maple trees feeding on the keys.

3. You may still see farmers harvesting hard corn this month.



The natural world provides many yuletide adornments in December such as the festive winterberry, fluffy chickadee baubles and radiant cardinals, pictured above at our feeders. Inset, an immature Cooper's hawk sits in a tree. Most years, all of the Kawartha Lakes are frozen by Dec. 12.

Karl Egressy, Special to The Examiner

Even though the plants are dry, withered and often frozen, they still have excellent food value.

4. Today is the full moon. In December, the moon rises about 30 degrees north of due east and sets 30 degrees north of due west.

5. Ducks lingering until freeze-up usually include common golden-eye, common merganser and American black duck. A small number of common loons, too, often remain quite late.

6. 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.

7. Watch for overwintering birds such as robins feeding on clusters of mountain-ash berries, wild grape, sumac and European buckthorn.

8. Great black-backed, glaucous and Iceland gulls may still turn up at the Bensfort Road landfill, at Little Lake and on open patches of water on the larger Kawartha Lakes.

9. During the second week of December, Jupiter, Mercury and Mars will offer an elegant holiday gathering, very low in the east-southeast sky. The best time to look will be around 6:30 a.m. Binoculars are recommended.

10. Loons sometimes become trapped in the ice when an expanse

of open water freezes overnight. Iced-in birds can fall prey to bald eagles.

11. On area lakes such as Jack, Katchewanooka, Buckhorn and Stoney, eagles are sometimes seen sitting on the ice near open water or perched in nearby trees.

12. Most years, all of the Kawartha Lakes are frozen by Dec. 12.

13. The Geminid meteor shower usually peaks around the 12th to 14th of the month. It is thought to be intensifying every year. Recent showers have seen 120-160 meteors per hour under optimal conditions.

14. Skunks may emerge from their winter slumber to search for food during mild spells.

15. The red squirrel's coat is now a brilliant russet. It is also much thicker than the summer coat.

16. White spruce and eastern hemlock release their seeds during late fall and winter. It is not uncommon to find the snow beneath these species powdered with seeds. The cone crop on spruce trees this year is the heaviest in recent memory.

17. Between mid-December and early January, Christmas Bird Counts take place across North and Central America. The Peterborough count will be held today, Dec. 17. Anyone who is interested in participating should contact Tony Bigg at tandbigg@aol.com or

call 652-7541.

18. "Nip twigs" on the ground below conifers are a sure sign of red squirrel activity. Squirrels nip off the tips of conifer branches allowing the twig to fall to the ground. They then scurry down the tree, remove the cones and buds, and leave the rest of the twig there. The buds are usually consumed immediately.

19. By 8 p.m., the Andromeda galaxy is nearly directly overhead. At 2.2 million light years away, it is the farthest celestial object detectable with the naked eye.

20. December is the peak calling month for both the eastern screech owl and the great horned owl.

21. Today marks the winter solstice. At precisely 7:22 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, winter begins in the Northern Hemisphere. Today, the sun rises at its southernmost point on the eastern horizon, and sets at its southernmost point in the west. Sunrise is not until 7:46 a.m.

22. Moose shed their antlers between now and February.

23. The last of our local "giant" Canada geese usually depart in late December. Most go no further south than Pennsylvania.

24. When viewed from a distance, the upper branches of white birch create a beautiful purple haze in the forest canopy.

25. The chance of having a white Christmas in the Kawarthas is

more than 80 per cent.

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. A huge bank of clouds along the horizon is a common winter sight when you look south from Peterborough on a clear day. These clouds form over Lake Ontario as a result of water vapour rising from the relatively warm lake and condensing in the colder air above.

28. Both the sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks are quite common in the city during the winter months. They are probably attracted by the large number of prey species such as starlings and mourning doves to be found in built up areas. These hawks fly with a characteristic flap-flap-glide style and can be easily identified at considerable distances.

29. Beautiful Venus, with its steady, silvery light, is easily visible in the evening sky in late December.

30. If you live outside of the city near a forest or woodlot, you may have flying squirrels providing nightly entertainment at your bird feeder. They are quite tame.

31. Even though the days grow longer after the winter solstice, the increase in daylight is in the afternoon, not in the morning.