

localnews

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LIVING

Jupiter dazzles in December

Look to eastern sky at nightfall for one of the highlights of the start of winter

Although snow that comes and stays in December is becoming less and less a sure thing, other events this month can still be depended upon. Regardless of the vagaries of the weather, this is always a time of long nights and short days, scintillating winter constellations, intriguing avian visitors from the north and, of course, the Christmas tree.



DREW MONKMAN

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

I am firmly in the camp of those who prefer to buy a real tree. First of all, Christmas tree farms provide good habitat for birds and are often located on soils that could not support other crops. Real trees also absorb considerable amounts of CO₂ from the atmosphere and, unlike artificial trees, they can be recycled. My first choice for a tree is always the balsam fir. With its symmetrical shape, long-lasting needles and wonderful fragrance, no other tree can beat it.

I've always thought that artificial trees are a rather sad choice. Granted, they are reusable and not as messy as a real tree. However, they are usually made with polyvinyl chloride, is one of the most environmentally offensive forms of petroleum-derived plastic. Most are manufactured overseas and shipped great distances, thereby creating a huge carbon footprint. More than anything, though, artificial trees are just one more way in which contact with the natural world is disappearing from our lives.

The events listed below are typical of an average December in the Kawarthas. Some events occur over the entire month while others are more restricted.

- 1. Be sure not to miss dazzling Jupiter in the eastern sky at nightfall. Our largest planet, Jupiter is now in "opposition," meaning that it rises in the east as the sun sets in the west. In the southeast at early dawn, you can see Mercury (close to the horizon) with Venus (brightest) and Saturn just above it. For more detailed information, go to earthsky.org
- 2. A small number of common loons, mostly young-of-the-year birds, often linger on area lakes until freeze-up. Loons are gray - not black - at this time of year and have a white throat.
- 3. 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.
- 4. Before too much snow falls, walk around the edge of swamps to look for interesting ice formations such as ice crystals imitating stalagmites in a limestone cave. Leaves, sticks, and bubbles frozen in the ice can also be intriguing.
- 5. Welcome to the "dark turn of the year." Daylight this month averages only about 8 ¾ hours. Compare this to 15 ½ hours in June - a difference of 6 ¾ hours!
- 6. Watch for large flocks of bohemian waxwings. These beautiful birds are slightly larger than cedar waxwings and have rufous-coloured feathers under the tail. They are attracted to the fruit of flowering crab, mountain-ash, European buckthorn and the fleshy, bluish seed cones of eastern red-cedar.



KARL EGRESSY Special to The Examiner



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Wikipedia

Flocks of beautiful Bohemian waxwings (top) can be expected shortly. The balsam fir and its soft, blunt needles (left) make great cut-your-own Christmas trees. A fire in the hearth is a Christmas Eve treat, but buy local wood to prevent the spread of invasive insects.

- 7. As with most mammals, the fur of the fisher becomes denser and glossier in the winter months. Fisher pelts were once in such demand that the carnivores almost became extinct in the early 1900s. Since then populations have increased naturally due to a number of factors including more forest habitat and lower snow depths.
- 8. Petroglyphs Provincial Park has been a productive birding destination as of late - and is always a great place to go for a walk. In recent days, both a black-backed woodpecker and a gray jay have been recorded along the main road, just north of the gatehouse. Although the park is officially closed now, you can still walk in.
- 9. Take a drive along River Rd. N. to Lakefield to look for ducks such as buffleheads, goldeneyes and both common and hooded mergansers.
- 10. Lake sturgeon, a highly migratory fish species which is dependent on river environments, move into deeper water for the winter months. However, being migratory makes sturgeon vulnerable to human influences such as the construction of artificial barriers or manipulation of water flow. Like a number of other fishes, they are now designated as a Species at Risk in Ontario. A small population of lake sturgeon still exists in the Trent River, south

of Rice Lake.

- 11. Robins should be fairly common this month and throughout the coming winter. The wild fruits that constitute the robin's winter diet - grape, mountain-ash, buckthorn, hawthorn, etc. - have produced a good crop once again this year.
- 12. Most years, the Kawartha Lakes are frozen by mid-December. However, there is considerable variability in the date of freeze-up from one year to the next, especially in light of climate change.
- 13. With all the leaves off our deciduous trees and evergreen trees and boughs so much a part of the holiday season, this is a great month to learn to identify our native 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.
- 14. Throughout the late fall and winter, gray squirrels are often seen high up in Manitoba and Norway maples feeding on the keys.
- 15. The daily maximum in December averages -1 C and the minimum -9 C. Keep these numbers in mind when listening to weather reports this month. The mean monthly temperature for October this year was 1.3 C warmer than average. It appears that November

will have been slightly warmer than usual, too.

- 16. Between mid-December and early January, Christmas Bird Counts take place across North and Central America. The 61st Peterborough area count will be held today, Dec. 16th. Birders will be out from dawn until dusk, identifying and counting all of the birds they see. Inexperienced observers will be partnered with a more experienced birder. Contact Tony Bigg at tanddbigg@sympatico.com or phone 652-7541 if you wish to participate.
- 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 Yuletide firewood. Be sure to buy and burn all firewood locally because of the danger of inadvertently spreading invasive insect species such as the emerald ash borer. This species has not yet been found in Peterborough County.
- 18. "Nip twigs" on the ground below conifers are a sure sign of red squirrel activity. If you walk quietly through the woods you will sometimes even hear the sounds of the squirrels tearing cones apart with their teeth.
- 19. 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 vicinity of Jack, Katchewanooka, Buckhorn, and Stony lakes.

20. Over the past 30 years, trumpeter swans have been reintroduced to Ontario. The species now nests in the Kawarthas. A few individuals also choose to overwinter here on bodies of open water. Most of these swans have a yellow wing tag bearing a number.

• 21. Today marks the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year and the first official day of winter. 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., while sunset is upon us by 4:37 p.m. This translates into only eight hours and 51 minutes of daylight.

• 22. The Petroglyphs Christmas Bird Count takes place today. Species with a northern affinity such as barred owls and gray jays are often recorded. Call Colin Jones at 705-652-5004 if you are interested in participating.

• 23. Some wonderful Christmas smells include freshly-baked gingerbread, hot cocoa, nutmeg, the smell of a wood fire when you're walking outside at night and, of course, the Christmas tree.

• 24. The chance of having a white Christmas in the Kawarthas is better than 80%.

• 25. One of the oldest holiday traditions is to decorate the home with English holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), a European species with evergreen, spine-edged leaves. The Kawarthas actually has its own native holly, namely the deciduous winterberry holly (*Ilex verticillata*). Its bright red berries look wonderful in outdoor Christmas planters.

• 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. The migratory birds that breed in the Kawarthas are now on their wintering grounds. For example, the ruby-throated hummingbirds that were coming to your feeder this summer are now happily dining on hibiscus nectar somewhere in Mexico.

• 28. Tonight is the full moon. The December moon rides higher in the sky than at any other time of year.

• 29. December is the peak calling period for both eastern screech and great horned owls. The best nights to hear them are usually those with falling barometric pressure and a full or gibbous moon.

• 30. Identifying and interpreting mammal tracks is a fascinating pastime and adds a great deal to an outing. Keep an eye open, too, for scat (animal droppings) which is actually easiest to identify in winter. Coyote scat, for example, is often found on rail-trails or roads, contains mostly hair, and is about the diameter of a cigar in size. It is usually black and tapered at one end. However, if it has been lying in the sun for a while it will be bleached to a lighter color.

• 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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