

DeKalb County Forest Preserve District Wildlife Highlights

January, February & March of 2020

Prepared by Patrick McCrea



This January birds could be spotted foraging throughout the Forest Preserves as we continued our work removing non-native invasive bush honeysuckle. By removing and treating invasive bush honeysuckle and other invasive plants we are making room for native flowers, grasses, shrubs, and trees. Native plants contribute to a diverse ecosystem promoting all kinds of native wildlife. One of the more noticeable removals was along the trail at Wilkinson-Renwick Marsh. Red-bellied woodpeckers are a common sight at this Forest Preserve in the winter. This species feeds on a variety of things including insects, nuts, berries, along with annual and perennial plant seeds. The hackberry trees that are spattered along the trail provide important forage for these birds and other wildlife. Red-bellied woodpeckers excavate their nests in dead trees many times placing their new nest under last year's nest. If you look out over the marsh you can see dead trees provide homes to these woodpeckers and other wildlife.

Photo by Tom Robbins

Another species that hangs out all year in the Forest Preserves is the Black-capped Chickadee. This species is a cavity nester as well. They prefer to excavate their own nest but will use abandon woodpecker nests or occasionally take to nest boxes. Dead trees provide both a nesting and foraging opportunity for these little birds. Insects hunkered down for the winter in soft wood or under loose bark have no chance against this fearsome predator. They also forage on seeds, plant material, frozen carcasses, and berries. Photo By Tom Robbins





While driving to the preserves this winter, many times we noticed Lapland Longspurs in open fields. These birds breed in the arctic tundra but winter in the United States. They forage in large flocks sometimes alongside Snow Buntings and Horned Larks. Often found in agricultural fields, they prefer areas with short vegetation mixed with bare ground. The Longspur part of their name comes from the rather long claw on their back toe.

Photo by Tom Robbins



The winter also gives us a chance to seed areas that we have prepared for restoration. While seeding a small wetland restoration at the soon to open Nelson Prairie we flushed a Wilson Snipe. These birds use their long flexible bill and probe up and down in the mud foraging for worms and invertebrates. These are ground nesting birds that nest in wetlands typically making a nest on a sedge or grass hummock hidden from predators. Photo by Tom Robbins

As winter gives way to spring wildlife becomes more evident in the Forest Preserves. In our efforts to provide quality habitat for wildlife we look for input from historic and current data. Understanding what plant and animal species were here historically and what species are here now shape our management practices for each preserve. Citizen science apps like iNaturalist and eBird have helped to give us current data to supplement our own survey efforts. Camera traps are one tool we use which allows us to better understand the wildlife that uses our preserves. This camera trap set on a tree over hanging an ephemeral wetland captured these wood ducks. Wood ducks are a sure sign of spring and if



you see a duck in a tree its most likely a wood duck in DeKalb county. They nest in hollow trees and also take to nest boxes, typically near water. Wood ducks can be found in many of our preserves that have open water. This species is sexually dimorphic, the males like the 2 above are brightly colored looking to attract a mate while the female is drab brown in comparison allowing her to blend in with her environment.



This camera just barely caught this American Mink. Mink are voracious predators hunting along streams and pond edges. They are semi-aquatic and can dive to investigate under rocks and logs to catch crayfish, frogs, and fish. They also eat small mice, voles, birds, and even take on muskrats. Ephemeral pools like this one support and attract a variety of wildlife. This camera captured mink, wood duck, grey squirrel, opossum, racoon, blue jay, American robin, Canada geese, muskrat, fox squirrel, and beaver all in 10 days. As the temperatures rise you can expect to start seeing more wildlife. Frogs are calling, birds are migrating north, and many species are looking for a mate.