

Friends of Princeton Open Space's 6th Annual Give Thanks for Nature Photo Contest

Inspiration for Photographing the Billy Johnson Mountain Lakes Nature Preserve in Winter

It is challenging to take compelling photographs of nature in late fall and early winter. This quiet season of muted colors requires the photographer to explore the landscape more deeply and to have patience while searching for the perfect subject, setting, and light. To help inspire contestants in our 6th Annual Give Thanks for Nature Photo Contest, Anna Corichi, Friends of Princeton Open Space's natural resource manager, put together this list of what you can expect to see at this time of year in the Billy Johnson Mountain Lakes Nature Preserve.

Cedar Waxwing by David Dibert



Birdlife: Local birder Melinda Varian notes that the most iconic birds one is likely to find at Mountain Lakes during the winter are Eastern Bluebirds and Pileated Woodpeckers. She also would expect to find Screech Owls and Great Horned Owls. And, she notes, "in winter, the woods there are full of White-throated Sparrows and Dark-eyed Juncos, both species that migrate from further North to spend the winter here. One should also expect to

see the beautiful little Ruby-crowned Kinglet and Golden-crowned Kinglet — both highly photogenic. And, as long as there are berries, there will be Cedar Waxwings."

To learn more about the birds you can find in winter at Mountain Lakes, check out the ebird website: Go to ebird.org; click on Explore; enter "Mercer" under Explore Regions and click on Mercer, New Jersey in the drop down menu; click the Hotspots tab, and choose Mountain Lakes Park (#17 on the list).

Seedheads, berries, and catkins often stick around through winter months, providing food and shelter for birds and other wildlife.

Small Mammals: Squirrels prepare for winter by caching food and fattening up, which allows them to remain active all winter. Squirrels are forest keepers in a way. They do not recover all of the acorns they bury, and those left untouched grow into the future oak trees of the forest. Other small mammals, such as rabbits, don't truly hibernate, but do slow down metabolic activity to survive cold temperatures. Look for peaks of activity on warmer winter days. Look for foxes, chipmunks, squirrels, rabbits, raccoons, and skunks at the Preserve this winter.

White-tailed Deer: Highly abundant in New Jersey due to reduced habitat and lack of natural predators, you will most likely see white-tailed deer at the Preserve. The over-browsing of native plants by deer is a major threat to the sustainability of our forest ecosystems in NJ and results in a decline of future canopy trees such as oaks and pines while promoting invasive plants. At Mountain Lakes Preserve we



Squirrel by Edwin Anderson

constructed several deer exclosures and cages to protect our future canopy. Deer are most active at dawn and dusk and do not hibernate during the winter. Fall and winter are mating season for deer, often referred to as "rutting season." During this time males grow antlers used to assert dominance against competing males, and to communicate territory and other information by scraping trees and releasing scent through forehead and other glands.

Marcescence is the phenomena where certain trees, including oaks and beeches, do not drop their leaves entirely. It is not entirely known why certain trees do this, but some theories include to protect their buds from predation and cold temperatures and to spread out nutrient cycling resultant from leaf drop. Nonetheless, birds and other wildlife benefit from the shelter and windbreak offered by the dry, crispy, marcescent leaves.

The Elements: Snow, frost, ice, fog, mist, moisture, wind, water flow, and the shifting light of dawn and dusk all add drama and beauty to the natural landscape.

Boulders, Moss, and Lichens: Boulder fields and Devil's Cave can be found by taking the red or white trails northeast to the northern-most section of the park. Mosses, lichens, and rock cap ferns can be found in this area, offering dramatic color against a dormant backdrop.

Texture, bark, and buds are some of the only clues for winter tree ID. Bark form can change dramatically throughout a plant's life cycle, as it ages and/or combats disease.

Snags and dead trees provide a source of life and shelter, so be sure to inspect carefully if you come across a snag. Mushrooms, insects, birds, and small mammals may utilize dead and dying trees.

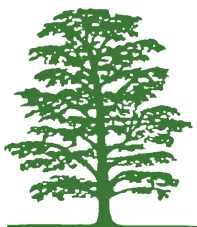
Landscapes and Vistas: The Billy Johnson Mountain Lakes Nature Preserve contains a variety of ecosystems including meadows, upland forests, boulder fields, wetlands, and lake habitats. To view them all, take the Mountain Lake Loop Trail, head over to Tusculum Fields, and trek the boulder fields of Witherspoon Woods.

Evergreens offer a safe haven for many birds and small mammals during the cold winter months. Cedars, pines, hemlocks, and hollies are some of the native evergreens at Mountain Lakes. By taking a closer look, you may discover berries, pine cones, or even a wild critter.

Historical Features: Throughout the Preserve are remnants of the past industries once practiced on this land. Old stone bridges, dams, and stone foundations remain from the days of the Princeton Ice Company and from the agricultural use of this land.



Snowy Trees by Oleg Magni



Friends of Princeton Open Space

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