

## Nature in the Neighborhood – January 2024

### Through the Woods and Over the Boardwalk

It's the start of a new season, one that's a bit colder and darker, one that tempts us to stay indoors where it's warm and light. But resist that urge because winter is a perfect time to visit nature in our neighborhood, whether it be by taking a walk in the woods or a stroll along the beach. Though the landscape may appear dreary and lifeless, there's much to discover and enjoy in nature this time of year.

For instance, you can find animal tracks and burrows in the snow, dried wildflowers in the understory, and abandoned bird, squirrel and wasp nests in the overstory. Take a field guide with you, such as *A Guide to Nature in Winter*, by Donald Stokes, and learn what you can discover that makes the season come alive.

It may seem counterintuitive, but winter is ideal for birding. There may be fewer species than in the warmer months, but with the leaves off the trees you'll find the birds are much easier to spy. If you're lucky, you'll see migrating birds, especially along the coast, that you won't see in the summer.

There are several nearby conservation areas to visit, including Ewing Woods (by the new Swampscott elementary school) and Harold King Forest (off Nichols Road in Swampscott), but today I'd like to highlight the Forest River Conservation Area (FRCA) in Salem. That's because this fall the Swampscott Conservancy and the Friends of Salem Woods, with kind donations of money and labor, organized the building of a boardwalk in the FRCA that will make traveling over an intermittent stream easier and more fun.

The FRCA, just minutes away from the noise and hubbub of Vinnin Square, consists of approximately 97 acres of salt marsh, dense woodland, and open hilltop. The "Connector" trailhead, which is Swampscott's entrance to FRCA's expansive network of trails, is behind the Swampscott Cemetery, near the dog park. For a map of the trails, click on the "Special Places" tab on the Swampscott Conservancy's website: [swampscottconservancy.org](http://swampscottconservancy.org). There's also a trail map posted at the kiosk - built by an Eagle Scout - that's at the trailhead entrance.

To get to the Connector trailhead, enter the cemetery's main gate and follow the brown "dog park/trail head" signs which lead you to a parking area. Then walk down the steps on your right to the trailhead which is marked with a large red wooden sign. To get to the new boardwalk, follow the "red" trail until you come to a fork: the "green" trail on the left (which is a spur off the main red trail and eventually connects back up with the red trail) leads you to the new boardwalk. The more challenging route on the red trail requires you to navigate over large rocks in the stream.

The new green trail spur runs closer to, and parallel with, the railroad tracks and, beyond those, Thompson's Meadow estuary. This 113-acre parcel of undeveloped land, though located in Salem, actually belongs to Marblehead, having been purchased in the early part of the last century as a town water source at the time. A little further into

the trail is a bench - built by Swampscott Middle School students - where you can sit and observe the herons, egrets, and many other birds who visit the marsh.

The forest that surrounds you is secondary growth. Throughout the FRCA, you'll find the remnants of stone walls from colonial times, when the land had been cleared. You'll cross one on the green trail as you get closer to the boardwalk. Farmers pulled these plow-impeding stones from their fields and piled them on the edges. By the middle of the 19th century, New England was over 70 percent deforested by settlers. By the end of the century, thousands of fields were abandoned and the slow process of reforestation began, continuing to this day. It's estimated there once may have been 250,000 miles of stone walls in the Northeast, and even though most of them are crumbling today, here is an opportunity for you to reach out and put your hands on history.

Today, the secondary growth of trees includes such species as oak, birch, and pignut hickory and, up on the hilltop, red cedar and pine. Just before you reach the boardwalk, take a moment to admire the giant pine tree that towers over the trail.

As you cross the boardwalk, notice the "hoods" of skunk cabbage plants poking up from the ground. These low-growing plants occur in wetlands and are one of the first harbingers of spring

Shortly after you cross the boardwalk, the green trail reconnects with the red trail. If you go left, the red trail leads you deeper into the FRCA trail system; if you go right, you return to the Connector trailhead behind the cemetery -- but you will have to navigate the more difficult stream crossing.

As noted, the boardwalk was installed to allow for safer passage over the stream and wetlands that runs perpendicular to both the green and red trails. However, it also prevents repeated trampling of the wetland and its vegetation, thereby providing a benefit to the natural environment.

As a remedy for the winter doldrums, I recommend that you set off in search of nuthatches, chickadees and downy woodpeckers on the Connector's new green trail. It's a definite mood lift. And you may be as fortunate as I was recently, watching two swans majestically gliding over Thompson's Meadow.