

Nature in the Neighborhood – February 2025

The Second Month of the Year

Though it's the shortest month, February can feel like the longest. With the holiday celebrations over and perhaps our New Year's resolutions already broken, we're left with cold, dark, and snowy days. The urge is to just curl up and stay indoors.

Our advice at the Swampscott Conservancy is to do just the opposite – instead of staying inside, *get outside*. The landscape may appear dreary and lifeless but there's much to discover in nature this time of year. Take a walk in one of the nearby conservation properties. For a short hike, there's Ewing Woods, or for a longer one, try Harold King Forest, both in Swampscott, or head over to the Lynn Woods or the Breakheart Reservation in Saugus.

You'll find animal tracks 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 Stokes and learn what you can discover that makes the season – and you – come alive. For more in-depth reading on the interactions of plants and animals with their cold weather environment, check out *Life in the Cold: An Introduction to Winter Ecology* by Peter J. Marchand.

Winter is also a great time to go birding! Yes, there may be fewer species than you'll find in the warmer months, but the birds are much easier to spy now that the leaves are off the trees. There are also migrants that you won't see in the summer – seabirds who spend most of the year as far north as the Arctic often vacation in Massachusetts in winter.

If you would like to observe some of these migrating seabirds, the Conservancy has scheduled a winter shoreline bird walk on **Saturday, March 22, at 8:00 am** (rain/snow date, Sunday, March 23). We'll meet and start at the Fisherman's Beach parking lot and later head down to King's Beach and Red Rock Park.

There may be the opportunity to see Buffleheads, White Winged Scoters, Common Eiders, Mergansers, Loons, and/or Black Ducks. If you're curious to know which other seabirds have been spotted in Swampscott, see the list at:

<https://ebird.org/nh/hotspot/L813701?yr=cur&m=&rank=mrec>.

This event is free and open to the public but so that we can let you know if there is a cancellation or postponement due to inclement weather, please RSVP us at info@swampscottconservancy.org.

Studies consistently show that getting outdoors and into green space is good for your mental and physical health. Bird watching is an ideal way to do so. And keep in mind,

it's not just observing birds, but also hearing them that's beneficial. A 2022 study done in the United Kingdom found that just listening to bird song contributes to perceived attention restoration and stress recovery. Another study done that same year suggests that listening to birdsongs decreases anxiety; not surprisingly, traffic noise is related to higher depressiveness.

Little wonder then that, when she was in search of some relief from the growing divisiveness in the world, author Amy Tan turned to the natural world just beyond her window to watch the birds visiting her yard. What began as an attempt to find solace turned into something far greater—an opportunity to savor quiet moments during a volatile time, connect to nature in a meaningful way, and imagine the intricate lives of the birds she admired.

The Conservancy invites you to read the book Amy Tan wrote and illustrated: **“The Backyard Bird Chronicles.”** Then come to a discussion of the book on April 16 (just in time for honoring Earth Day!) at the Swampscott Public Library on Burrill Street at 6:30 pm. There'll be interesting conversation and light refreshments served. The library will have several copies of the book for Conservancy book club readers to borrow.

Sharing this beautiful book together marks the kickoff of the Conservancy's new book club, which will feature reading ecology-based books every three months or so. If you are interested in joining our book club, send your name and email to: info@swampscottconservancy.org, with the subject line: “Book Club,” so we can provide you with information on the upcoming books we'll be reading and dates we'll be meeting.

We invite you to take your bird guide and binoculars and go outside in the winter months to discover the vibrant bird life in our neighborhood. And don't forget to share your birding adventures with children. It's a wonderful way to spend time together - and to get them off the screens (at least for a while).

Becoming a winter birder in our neighborhood may be just the thing to boost your spirits and afford you some optimism in the cold, dark months of February and March. As Emily Dickinson said, “hope is the thing with feathers.”