

## Nature in the Neighborhood – January 2026

### Embracing – Not Escaping – The Winter

The travel ads this time of year can be oh-so-enticing. Pictured are cloudless skies, white sand beaches, swaying palm trees, and umbrellaed drinks. The caption reads: “Escape the Cold this Winter and Come to Florida!... Or Aruba! ... Or some other sunny southern location.” You can almost feel the sun on your face and taste the pina coladas. With the sun going down at 4:00 pm in our neighborhood, and the windchill plunging temperatures down into the teens, the invitation to fly south can be very tempting.

With the pressure and stress many felt during the December holidays, coupled with the dark and cold of our northern winter months, we’re braced for depression in January. They’ve even given the depression caused by the loss of light a name: Seasonal Affective Disorder (or, as appropriately known, SAD). Whether you suffer from SAD or not, the cold short days of the season can darken your mood and bring on the winter blues.

How, you may wonder, do those who live in the Scandinavian countries possibly survive? Well, it turns out they not only survive but actually thrive. Instead of escaping, they embrace the winter and all it brings.

In 2014, researcher Kari Leibowitz traveled to Tromsø, a city located above the Arctic Circle in Norway, where the sun doesn't rise above the horizon for two months of the year. Talk about dark and cold. Expecting to research the season's negative effects on mental health, she was surprised to learn – as described in her book *How to Winter: Harness Your Mindset to Thrive on Cold, Dark, or Difficult Days* – that the residents actually look forward to the winter with delight and enthusiasm. In Tromsø and other places that have the coldest, darkest, longest, and most intense winters, she encountered what she called the power of “wintertime mindset”- that is, the power of viewing the season as full of opportunity and wonder.

The winter lethargy that people feel comes in part from being inside too much. So, one piece of advice Leibowitz has for thriving on the “cold, dark, or difficult days” is to bundle up and go out and enjoy the winter weather. The people in northern Norway, she found, don't let the darkness or cold stop them from getting out in nature.

This is at the heart of what the Scandinavian call “friluftsliv” (pronounced “free-loofts-liv”). Though there's no direct translation, it roughly means “open air living.” The term was first coined by the playwright Henrik Ibsen in 1850s and is a way of life that finds harmony, joy, and well-being through immersion in the natural world. And it's a philosophy that isn't dependent on sunny, warm weather. Scandinavians are an outdoors-year-round people. A popular saying they have is “There is no such thing as bad weather, only the wrong clothes.”

There may be something to the notion that connecting with nature and the outdoors is a way to enhance well-being and happiness. Finland has, for the eighth year, been named the happiest country in the world, followed closely by the other Scandinavian countries.

The northern nations know how to enjoy the winter season. They engage in sports such as ice skating, skiing, sledding, and snowshoeing, or just going for walks outside. They also host plenty of winter festivals and events, such as Norway's Ice Music Festival, where the instruments and art are made of ice and snow, and Sweden's Kiruna Snow Festival featuring snow sculptures, reindeer races, snow mazes, and a local market selling hand-crafted goods.

In a recent Globe Sunday Magazine article, writer Miles Howard confessed to traveling to colder climes for his winter getaways where, as he put it, the cities had "learned to do winter right." He lamented that Boston, unlike the Canadian cities he's visited, hasn't invested enough in winter events and offerings.

Massachusetts cities and towns should do more to encourage winter activities, especially those that get you outdoors, yet the opportunities we do have to get outside this season should not be overlooked:

- Massachusetts Audubon invites you to find your winter wonder with the seasonal programs, events, and adventures it offers ([massaudubon.org/news/latest/find-your-winter-wonder-with-mass-audubon](https://massaudubon.org/news/latest/find-your-winter-wonder-with-mass-audubon)). While the December happenings have passed, there are still opportunities in January and February, such as its family-friendly "Owl Prowl" hikes under the light of the moon to look and listen for Barred Owls, Great Horned Owls, and Eastern Screech-Owls.
- The Trustees of the Reservation also offers fun-filled ways to celebrate the season with winter adventures at its properties, such as its "Dunes by the Light of the Full Moon" outings in January, February, and March where you can hike the beach and dunes of Castle Neck by the magical glow of the full moon. [thetrustees.org/program/winter-outdoor-activities-massachusetts/](https://thetrustees.org/program/winter-outdoor-activities-massachusetts/)
- Essex Greenbelt ([ecga.org](https://ecga.org)) also has outdoor winter activities, including its January 31, 2026 "Family Nature Series – Animal Tracks" where you and your family can explore the signs and tracks that animals leave behind.
- During the winter months, the Swampscott Conservancy Sunday hikes are more informal, typically announced by email on the preceding Thursday. These walks include local venues such as Salem Woods, Lynn Woods, Appleton Farm in Hamilton, and Breakheart Reservation in Saugus, among others. (A list of locations and their description can be found under "Event List & Sign Up" link at [swampscottconservancy.org/events](https://swampscottconservancy.org/events).) Those interested in getting email

notices of upcoming winter hikes should send an email to [walks@swampscottconservancy.org](mailto:walks@swampscottconservancy.org).

Admittedly, in our neighborhood's seemingly colder than usual winter this year, it's hard not to look longingly at those warm weather vacation advertisements. But we should also follow the lead of our far northern neighbors and put on the layers, zip up the jacket, and get outside to embrace the winter this year!

From all of us at the Conservancy, we wish you a Happy New Year.