

localnews

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LIVING

Dear diary: December doings

A daily log of what to look for – on the water, at the feeders . . . and in deep space

Winter-like weather this fall has been conspicuous by its absence. In fact, we have just been through the first completely snowless November in decades. Not only was there no snow, but November was warmer, drier and provided about 30% more sunshine than usual. And it looks like this trend may just continue. According to Dave Philips of Environment Canada, a generally mild winter appears to be in the offing – maybe. This is partly due to the return of El Nino, a warm Pacific Ocean current that usually helps create milder than normal conditions in much of Canada.



Drew Monkman
OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Although snow that comes and stays in December is not always a sure thing, other events in nature are. Regardless of the vagaries of the weather, this is always a month of spectacular meteor showers, fascinating avian visitors from the north, extremely short days, and ubiquitous evergreen trees to be admired. The events listed below are typical of an average December in the Kawarthas. Some events occur over the entire month while others are more restricted in time.

• **1st** – Almost all migratory birds that breed in the Kawarthas are now on their wintering grounds. Large numbers of barn swallows spend the winter in Brazil, while the majority of our ruby-throated hummingbirds are relaxing somewhere between southern Mexico and northern Panama.

• **2nd** – Today is the first of two full moons this month. The moon is full when its orbit takes it to the opposite side of the Earth from the Sun. The December moon rides higher in the sky than during any other month of the year.

• **3rd** – Look for Jupiter's commanding presence in the southern sky just after sunset. It is by far the brightest star-like object visible. By using binoculars and bracing yourself to reduce hand-shake, you may be able to spot several of Jupiter's moons.

• **4th** – Watch for gray squirrels – most of which, in Peterborough, are actually black – high up in city maple trees feeding on the keys.

• **5th** – The fresh, damp, shallow snow of early December makes for excellent conditions to see and learn mammal tracks.

• **6th** – If you find a mosquito in your bathroom or basement, it is probably a species known as *Culex pipiens*. They overwinter as adult, mated females.

• **7th** – According to Ron Pittaway of the Ontario Field Ornithologists, poor seed crops in southern Ontario this year mean that very few winter finches are expected. At best, a few common redpolls may put in an appearance but siskins, purple finches and pine grosbeaks will probably be absent from the Kawarthas this winter.

• **8th** – Birders often head down to Niagara Falls in early December. The entire Niagara River corridor is internationally recognized as a "Globally Significant Important Bird Area" since it has the largest and most diverse concentration of gulls



KARL EGRESSEY photo



Photo courtesy of NASA



KARL EGRESSEY photo

Drive along River Road to Lakefield this month and you might see a goldeneye (top). The glaucous gull is one of several species that winter at Niagara Falls. On a clear night in early December, skygazers might be able to see the moons of Jupiter (left) using only binoculars.

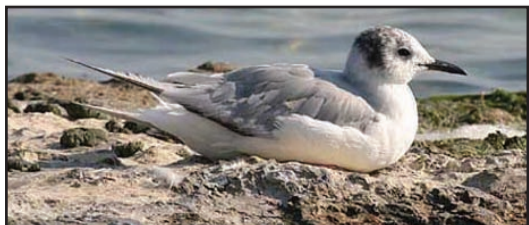
in the world. Nineteen different species have been recorded here and rarities show up every year.

• **9th** – Watch for northern shrikes, winter visitors from Nunavut and the Northwest Territories, perched at the very top of small trees in open, rural areas.

• **10th** – Deer carcasses are an important source of food for bald eagles that overwinter in the Kawarthas. On area lakes such as Jack, Katchewanooka, Buckhorn and Stoney, eagles are sometimes seen sitting on the ice near open water or perched in nearby trees.

• **11th** – Take a drive along River Road north to Lakefield to look for ducks such as common goldeneye and common merganser. A handful of these birds usually spend the entire winter here.

• **12th** – In an average year, the



KARL EGRESSEY photo

Bonaparte's gull is common to the Niagara River.

Kawartha Lakes are frozen by Dec. 12.

• **13th** – The early morning hours of today and tomorrow will be the peak viewing days for the Geminids meteor shower. Considered to be the most consistently good meteor shower of the year, the Geminids are known for producing up to 60 multicoloured meteors per hour at their peak. Some meteors should also be visible as early as Dec. 6 and as late as the 19th. This year's conditions should be excellent since the moon will not be visible at night, so its glow won't interfere with seeing the meteors. The best viewing begins at about 2 a.m. To truly appreciate a meteor shower, you need to get out of the city to where there is less light pollution.

• **14th** – With its symmetrical shape, long-lasting needles, and wonderful fragrance, balsam fir makes a wonderful Christmas tree.

• **15th** – On average, December temperatures are only slightly milder month than January and February in the Peterborough area. The daily maximum averages -1C and the minimum -10C.

• **16th** – Tonight is the New Moon, which means no moon is visible at all. This should make for excellent viewing conditions for seeing the Andromeda galaxy. Right now it is located directly

overhead and appears like an oval-shaped smudge – a smudge made up of 500 billion stars! At 2.2 million light years away, it is the farthest celestial object detectable with the naked eye.

• **17th** – Pregnant adult queen wasps overwinter in crevices in rocks and wood. You may inadvertently bring one into the house, tucked away in a piece of firewood.

• **18th** – "Nip twigs" on the ground below conifers are a sure sign of red squirrel activity. Squirrels nip off the tips of conifer branches allowing the twig to fall to the ground. They then scurry down the tree, remove the cones and buds and leave the rest of the twig there. The buds are usually consumed immediately.

• **19th** – Spring peepers, wood frogs, and gray treefrogs are overwintering as frozen blocks of amphibian ice under a blanket of snow and fallen leaves on the forest floor.

• **20th** – Between mid-December and early January, Christmas Bird Counts take place across North and Central America. The Peterborough area count is today, Dec. 20, while the Petroglyphs count will be Sunday, Dec. 27. Contact Tony Bigg at tandbigg@sympatico.com or phone 652-7541. Newcomers to the area, and newcomers to birding, are welcome to participate.

• **21st** – Today marks the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year and the first official day of winter. At precisely 7:04 a.m. winter begins in the Northern Hemisphere. Today, the sun rises at its southernmost point on the eastern horizon, and sets at its southernmost point in the west. Sunrise is not until 7:46 a.m., while sunset is upon us by 4:37 p.m. This translates into only eight hours and 51 minutes of daylight. With nights as long as June days, it's no wonder that the ancients feared that the sun would disappear altogether.

• **22nd** – If you're out for a ski or hike, don't be too surprised to find quarter-inch-long insects with long legs and clear wings that look a bit like mosquitoes. These are winter crane flies. You may even find a mating pair on the snow surface.

• **23rd** – Our near-resident flocks of "giant" Canada geese depart when snow and ice cover their feeding and roosting areas around Peterborough. Most move south to the United States, some as far as Tennessee.

• **24th** – This is a great night to take a close look at the first quarter moon. Expect an impressive show of craters and shadows. Binoculars are all you need.

• **25th** – The chance of a white Christmas in the Kawarthas is better than 80%.

• **26th** – In the southeast night sky, look for the Winter Six: Orion, Taurus, Auriga, Canis Major and Canis Minor. The winter constellations shine brightly and are easy to pick out.

• **27th** – A huge bank of clouds along the horizon is a common winter sight when you look south from Peterborough on a clear day. These clouds form over Lake Ontario as a result of water vapour rising from the relatively warm lake and condensing in the colder air above.

• **28th** – Both the sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks are quite common in the city during the winter months. These hawks fly with a characteristic flap-flap-glide style and can be easily identified, even at considerable distances.

• **29th** – If you're skiing or hiking in the forest, check out the vertical faces of cliffs or boulders for evergreen polypody ferns.

• **30th** – Learn to identify spruce trees, the only conifer with short, stiff, sharp needles. You can use the mnemonic: "When you're all spruced up, you look so sharp!"

• **31st** – Today is the second full moon of December. When a month has two full moons, the second one is called a "blue moon". Blue moons are rare, hence the phrase "once in a blue moon." They happen only once every two or three years.



DON LAVANGE photo

A full moon shines bright.

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