

## localnews

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## LIVING

## Comes the cold and darkness

The winter solstice is a December highlight, one of nature's most spiritual times

I often feel my strongest connection to the spiritual dimensions of nature as we approach the winter solstice. I'm not alone. The solstice has always been a time of awe and amazement, an event noticed and celebrated by ancient cultures on almost every continent. With the long nights and short days, low mid-day sun, increasingly cold weather, leafless trees, the near total lack of animal sounds, and the general hunkering down of nature, it's no wonder ancient peoples thought the sun would disappear altogether and that all life would perish with it.



Drew Monkman

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

However, instead of continuing to rise and set a little further south each day - as it has been doing since June 21 - the sun abruptly halts its southward march and appears to "stand still" - the meaning of the word solstice - before proceeding to move northward once again. After Dec. 22, it will rise and set further and further north each day and climb higher and higher into the sky. The solstice represents nothing less than the assurance that the days will again grow longer and spring shall return.

The tilting of the earth away from the sun in fall and winter affects every aspect of climate as well as plant and animal behaviour. The events listed below are typical of an average December in the Kawarthas. Some occur over the entire month while others are more restricted in time. Try to make getting out and enjoying the natural world part of your holiday traditions.

## DECEMBER DAYS AND NIGHTS

1. Almost all migratory birds that breed in central Ontario are now on their wintering grounds. Many of "our" eastern bluebirds are in Ohio, while large flocks of common loons are off the coast of the Carolinas.
2. Conifer needles exude wonderful, resinous smells, especially on sunny, mild December days.
3. Throughout the late fall and winter, gray squirrels are often seen high up in Manitoba and Norway maples feeding on the keys.
4. Ducks lingering on lakes until freeze-up may include common goldeneye, common and hooded mergansers, and American black duck. A small number of common loons, mostly young-of-the-year birds, remain until the ice comes.
5. One of the oldest holiday traditions is to decorate our homes with English holly (*Ilex aquifolium*), a European species with evergreen, spine-edged leaves. The Kawarthas actually has its own native holly, namely the deciduous winterberry holly (*Ilex verticillata*). Its bright red berries are one of the visual treats of wetland edges in the late fall and are quite popular themselves in Christmas floral arrangements. The berries are abundant this year.
6. Before too much snow falls, this is good time to walk around the edge of swamps to look for interesting ice formations such as ice crystals imitating stalagmites in a limestone cave. Leaves, sticks, and bubbles frozen in the ice can also be intriguing.
7. The launch of a new book by the Peterborough Field Naturalists, "Nature in the Kawarthas," will take place this evening (see sidebar at top right of the page for details).
8. Welcome to the "dark turn of the



DREW MONKMAN photo



KARL EGRESSY Special to The Examiner

If you are looking for Christmas decorations, the Kawarthas has its own native holly, namely the deciduous winterberry holly (*Ilex verticillata*). Its bright red berries (above) are one of the visual treats of wetland edges in the late fall. The berries are abundant this year.

Most waterfowl leave this area when cold weather arrives but you can still see several species, including the American black duck (left), until freeze-up. That usually occurs in mid-December.

year." Daylight this month averages only about 8 ¼ hours. Compare this to 15 ½ hours in June - a difference of 6 ¾ hours!

9. Bears are now snugly ensconced in their winter dens.
10. The December moon rises about 30 degrees north of due east and sets 30 degrees north of due west. It also rides higher in the sky than during any other month of the year. The Algonquian name for December's full moon - which occurs today - is the Cold Moon.
11. Balsam fir makes the perfect Christmas tree, thanks to its symmetrical shape, long-lasting needles and wonderful fragrance.
12. In late fall and early winter, rare avian visitors to central Ontario may unexpectedly show up at feeders. Some, such as the varied thrush, a species native to western North America and the Pacific coast, can be thousands of kilometres from their normal range.

## METEOR SHOW

13. The early morning hours of Dec. 13 and 14 are the peak viewing times 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 meteors per hour at their peak.
14. Most years, the Kawartha Lakes are frozen by mid-December. However, there is considerable variability from one year to the next, especially as the effects of climate change are being increasingly felt.
15. If you are fortunate, you may have a family of flying squirrels providing nightly entertainment at your bird feeder.
16. 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. Be sure to buy and burn all firewood locally because of the danger of accidentally spreading invasive insect species such as the emerald ash borer and the Asian long-horned beetle, both of which are a huge threat to our native hardwood trees.

17. Central Ontario is subject to episodes of freezing rain most winters. However, it is usually confined to a small area. Freezing rain is like ordinary rain until it strikes a frozen surface where it forms a layer of clear ice. As the layer thickens, the weight of the ice can cause great damage to forests as branches break off and entire trees come down.

18. From Dec. 14 to Jan. 5 (inclusive), Christmas Bird Counts take place throughout North America. The count data reflects trends in bird populations such as the expansion of red-bellied woodpeckers into the Kawarthas. The Peterborough area count is today, Dec. 18, while the Petroglyphs area count will be on Monday, Jan. 2. To participate. Contact Tony Bigg at tandbigg@sympatico.com or phone 705-652-7541.

19. December is the peak calling period for both eastern screech and great horned owls. The best nights to hear them are usually those with falling barometric pressure and a full or gibbous moon.

20. With all the leaves off our deciduous trees and coniferous trees and boughs so much a part of the holiday season, this is a great month to learn to identify our native conifers. Memory aids such as "white pine needles come in bundles of five and 'white' has five letters" can be helpful.

21. Like most mammals, the fur of the fisher varies seasonally, becoming

denser and glossier in the winter months. Fisher pelts were in such demand that they almost became extinct in the early 1900s. Since then, fisher populations have increased naturally due to a number of factors including more forest habitat and lower snow depths. The species has now expanded its range well south of the Canadian Shield.

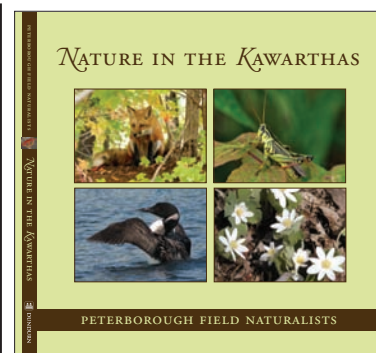
22. Today marks the winter solstice. At precisely 12:30 a.m., winter begins in the Northern Hemisphere. The tilting of the Earth away from the sun also produces the longest night of the year with more than 15 hours of darkness. The sun rises and sets at its southernmost points on the eastern and western horizons.

## STURGEON GO DEEP

23. Lake sturgeon, a highly migratory fish species which is dependent on river environments, move into deeper water for the winter months. Fish use less energy in these areas of slower water, which helps them survive the winter. Sturgeon can still be found in the Trent River.

24. Because cone crops are abundant across much of the boreal forest right now, we probably won't see a lot of winter finches at feeders this winter. However, small numbers of pine siskins, white-winged crossbills and both evening and pine grosbeaks might be the exceptions to the rule. We can also expect flocks of bohemian waxwings in our area.

25. Holiday wreaths and other floral decorations bring native plants into our homes at this time of year. These often include fragrant pine, fir, spruce, and cedar boughs, fruit-laden winterberry holly twigs, bright red dogwood branches, and a variety of different



## Book launch

**What:** Official launch of *Nature in the Kawarthas*, a new book produced by the Peterborough Field Naturalists, presents a wealth of information about the birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, insects, and plants that inhabit this special area. The articles are accompanied by more than 200 colour illustrations.

**Where:** Titles Bookstore, 399 George St. N., between Simcoe and Hunter streets.

**When:** Wednesday, Dec. 7, at 7:30 p.m. Refreshments will be served and copies of the book will be available for purchase.

cones.

26. The winter constellations shine brightly and are easy to pick out. In the southeast, look for the Winter Six: Taurus, Gemini, Auriga, Canis Major, Canis Minor, and, of course, Orion. The most prominent stars in these same constellations form an asterism known as the Winter Hexagon. You can see it by imagining a line joining Rigel, Aldebaran, Capella, Pollux/Castor, Procyon, and Sirius.

27. As a rule, winter birds are most often found around human habitations, open water, thick stands of coniferous trees, shrubby areas, and farmland. In the city, watch the sky for Cooper's and sharp-shinned hawks. They are fairly common in the winter and can be identified at considerable distances by their unique "flap-flap-glide" flight pattern.

28. Winter is a good time to look at the many different bracket fungi (polypores) that grow out flat from tree trunks. Mark S. Burnham Provincial Park is rich in polypores.

29. Keep an eye open, too, for mammal scat (animal droppings) which is actually easiest to identify in winter. Coyote scat, for example, is often found on rail-trails or roads. It contains mostly hair and is about the diameter of a cigar. It is usually black and tapered at one end.

30. Mudpuppies, which are foot-long, permanently-aquatic salamanders, are active and feed all winter long. They retain the gills and smooth skin of larvae as adults, but go undetected in many water bodies because of their secretive habits. Kemptville Creek at Oxford Mills in eastern Ontario is probably the best place to see mudpuppies in the entire province.

31. Even though the days do grow longer after the solstice, they begin to do so very slowly. The increase in daylight is in the afternoon. On Dec. 31, sunset is only about six minutes later than it was on Dec. 21 but, more surprisingly, the sun also rises about three minutes later at month's end than it did on the solstice.

*Drew Monkman is a Peterborough teacher and author of Nature's Year in the Kawarthas. He can be reached at dmonkman1@cogeco.ca. Visit his website and see past columns at www.drew-monkman.com.*

*Karl Egressy is a Guelph nature photographer. To see more of his work and to contact him, go to www.kegressy.com.*