

MARCH 1-14, 2015 NATURAL HISTORY NOTES FOR EASTVIEW

By Dick Harlow

EASTERN BLACK BEAR



Black Bear, *Ursus americanus*

Photo © www.black-bears.org

The Black Bear, *Ursus americanus*, is the smallest of the bear family on this continent, but the most common, ranging widely from coast to coast, up into Canada and Alaska and into the mountains. Wherever the country is forested and has food and habitat Black Bears will be found. Since they are largely omnivorous, eat a wide variety of food, this allows them to be comfortable in many varied habitats. Plus, they have learned that humans can be a good source of food.

Late November into December is the time this animal will go into semi hibernation also called a winter dormant period since they do not truly hibernate. This is an important fact because even though bears are programmed genetically to find a den and to go into this winter dormant period, their sleep is not as deep as an animal that is truly hibernating. If fall food is plentiful from acorns, beechnuts and other food items, their dormancy can be extended or if food was scarce during the fall they can wake up and forage during winter thaws or periods of extended mild weather. If a bear is out and about when it is really cold with snow on the ground, you can be sure that his procurement of food last fall was meager indeed.

A Black Bear was seen last spring on its way to the Middlebury College compost heap, consequently those of us who have bird feeders, especially after this winter, need to be vigilant. Bears have absolutely no problem in eating your birdseed and destroying your bird feeders in the process. Plus, it is a good idea to stop feeding birds by early spring anyway.

No one has seen, or has there been any reports of a bear being observed since last spring (2014) and probably we, as a community will never have to experience a bear using our property. However, there is the old adage, never say never! It is always best to be aware of the possibility, especially in the spring. This is when bears come out of dormancy, are hungry, food is scarce, thus human bird feeders become an easy target for getting something to eat. If a bear hadn't been seen this past spring

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I wouldn't have guessed that we would see a bear in our area; but, then again, never say never!

Frugivorous Birds

You have probably read the term frugivore, relative to some bird species that like fruit. Although there are many mammals that eat fruit, I would like to discuss our two North American waxwings. Good representatives of this frugivore group are the common Cedar Waxwing and the northern Bohemian Waxwing. We have Cedar Waxwings in the Northeast, whereas the Bohemian Waxwing is a more northern bird found in Canada. We see the Bohemians here in the US when the winters are tough and the northern food supply is scarce.

Cedar Waxwing



Cedar Waxwing, *Bombycilla cedrorum*

Photo © Wikipedia

The Cedar Waxwing, the masked fruit eating bird found in various crabapple trees, or feeding on Bartlett Pears and other fruit trees, is given its common name because the Cedar Waxwing, *Bombycilla cedrorum*, has small, red, wax-like tips to the ends of its secondary flight feathers. The name comes from this fact and that it also eats cedar berries. Other than that characteristic which it shares with the Bohemian Waxwing, there are significant differences to identify so that you know one from the other.

The Cedar Waxwing is a fairly uniform light brown on the head, around the black mask, throat, back, upper chest and light yellow from mid-chest down, to the white

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under tail coverts. From mid-way down the back to the tail the color changes to gray. Cedar Waxwings are easy birds to distinguish from other local birds. When matched against the Bohemian as these two pictures show, there is a great deal of difference in the color and chunkiness between the two species. However, in various lighting situations this may not always be apparent.

Bohemian Waxwing



Bohemian Waxwing, *Bombycilla garrulus*
Photo © Bryan Pfeiffer, Alberta Canada

The Bohemian Waxwing, *Bombycilla garrulus* is the big brother to the Cedar Waxwing. It has a more robust and aggressive look to it. This bird is grayish over most of its body, significantly different from the Cedar Waxwing, with a rusty patch against gray on the base of its forehead down to the top of the bill, and a black throat below the bill that is more prominent than what is seen on the Cedar Waxwing. But, to me the most significant characteristic that will tell you immediately whether you are looking at a Bohemian is the rusty under tail coverts. If you can't make up your mind what you are seeing in the crabapple tree, make sure you get a good look at the under-tail coverts. If they are white, or seem to be whitish yellow, it is a Cedar; if it is rusty brown it is a Bohemian. If all else fails, it is as simple as that!

TIMOTHY GRASS

Have you ever looked at a field, such as our meadow of grass and wildflowers undulating back and forth in the wind and wondered what type of plants make up this meadow? Ever wondered what in the world could grow so luxuriantly in the Addison Clay deposits of thousands of years ago? Believe it or not, many plants not only can tolerate clay, they actually like the increased pH of the soil and the compactness of the clay. That is sometimes hard for gardeners to understand, especially after trying to dig or transplant in clay.

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Timothy grass, *Phleum pratense*
Photo © Dick Harlow

Here is a group of Timothy Grass growing in our meadow at EastView. Notice the narrow tight cylinder seed heads and the rough texture to these tight cylinders. The seed heads are unique and easy to distinguish from other grasses.



Timothy grass seed head, *Phleum pratense*
Photo © Dick Harlow

In this picture you can see the rough texture and tight cylinder-like inflorescence as a unique characteristic of this grass.

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We are so accustomed to seeing agricultural grasses growing in hayfields, their sight is second nature and we hardly give a nod to what they are or where they come from. Timothy is a good example. Timothy is a grass whose origin is unsure. Some suggest it is the same grass as Herds Grass while others consider it a native grass that got its just due. A similar grass does grow in England, but whether it was brought to this country or was found here and brought to prominence by Timothy Hanson the references aren't concrete. However, the grass didn't become known as a hay grass until Timothy Hanson, a farmer and agriculturist in 1720 pushed for its use as a winter food source for livestock. The grass seems to be too tough and rough while growing for livestock to feed on. But, when dried in hay, livestock like it and survive well eating it and it became quite popular as a grass for hay fields in the later part of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. It was used extensively for 40 years from 1870-1910 when hay was the primary food source for horses, which were the main source of transport for man and wagon as well as for livestock on farms. It is still planted today, but doesn't have the importance it once did. Interestingly enough this grass is at home in either sandy soil or clay.

Note: These first two weeks of March have interestingly shown a great deal of bluebird activity. Bluebirds have been investigating nest boxes 6,7, and 8; these boxes are on the far side of the Deer Meadow retention pond! Their investigations simply mean that they are checking out the boxes as possible nest sites. It does not mean bluebirds will nest in those boxes. However, it does mean that spring and warmer weather is NOT far away.

Weather Tidbits

First Two Week MARCH Totals

All Measurements taken at solar noon (1130 EDT).

PRECIPITATION

MARCH 1-14, 2015

Total Precipitation: 8.0 mm or .3 inches

Precipitation includes rain and snow melt.

Snow Days: 3

Snowfall for MARCH 1-14: 87.2 mm or 3.4 inches

Overcast Days: 3

WIND

Highest wind gust: MARCH 12, @ 35 MPH, Direction: North

Average Wind speed for MARCH: 4.3 mph,

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Dominate Wind Direction: SSW

Days w/wind gusts 20-30 MPH: 10 Days w/wind gusts 30 MPH: 4

TEMPERATURE

Mean Temp: -3.1 C⁰/26.4⁰F

High Temp: 11.7 C⁰/53.1⁰F

Low Temp: -26.3 C⁰/-15.3⁰F

DAYS OF:

Min. Temp. 0.0 C⁰/32⁰F: 13 days

Max. Temp. 0.0 C⁰/32⁰F: 7 days

Min. Temp.: -18 C⁰/-0.4⁰F: 3 days