

## 12 months in Buchanan County Parks and Natural Areas

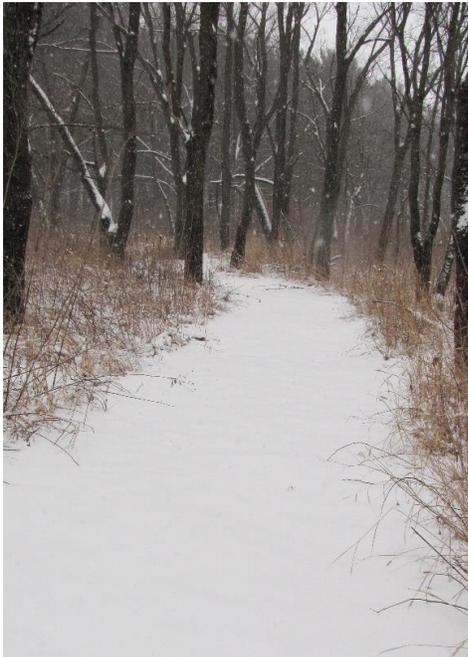
February – Buffalo Creek Area <https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Buchanan/Park/Buffalo-Creek-Area.aspx>)

Directions: On County Road D22 one mile east of Winthrop.

If you go: The park is open to walk in only visitors from October 1 – April 14. Trail goes either south or west from entrance gate. Visitors can also walk the road or off trail through the park. Binoculars are a good idea if you want to ID the winter songbirds that are here.

---

There is no quiet quite like the quiet of a winter snowfall. It was during Monday's snow that I ventured back to Buffalo Creek Area to see what there was to see and photograph for this article. With the



exception of traffic sounds from nearby Hwy 20, the only sounds came from the soft tick of snow hitting my jacket, the swish of my cross-country skis, and a lone chickadee brave enough to be out and about during the snowfall.

Wide swaths of white made the trails very visible (Photo 1) and only a few scattered branches and twigs blocked the route as I headed south from the entrance. A glob of white among the highbush cranberry windbreak caught my eye and a closer inspection revealed snow piling up on an old robin nest. Few birds utilize their nests beyond the one breeding season, but the snow covered creation still seemed a picture of desolation. (Photo 2)



The first section of trail crosses over the entrance road and continues south toward the wetland pond. Although completely frozen, two wood duck boxes and an open expanse of snow mark the area well. If I had not been wearing my skis, a quick investigation of the boxes would have been in order. Wood ducklings leave the box and jump out into the water below within hours of hatching, the only sign left behind is the shells. If no other critter takes up residence after the ducks, you can still find the shells amongst the mother's downy feathers (Photo 3) and count them to see how successful any particular box has been. Counting and refurbishing of wood duck boxes is a yearly winter activity for conservation staff.



From here I went off-trail past the barrier posts and continued along the fenceline to see what might be happening at the southeast ponds. Where there was once at least a small deer trail to this area was now overtaken by honeysuckle and fallen trees, so I gave up and turned back. When spring arrives and the ponds fill up, they make a great secluded nesting area for Canada Geese. School groups have used these little fish free ponds to net up and explore the macroinvertebrates (big bugs on the bottom) and see what they revealed about the water quality.

Once back to the trail I continued past the wood duck pond and west along the edge of a pine planting. Several of these trees are now dead -and as is often the case with dead standing trees – they seemed to reveal more evidence of animal life than they would have when living. Peeling bark revealed the twisting paths taken by bark beetle larvae (photo 4) as they tunneled through the recently dead or dying tree eating the tissue and growing as they went. Numerous holes indicate that even beneath the cover of the bark, woodpeckers could find some of the grubs for a tasty meal. Larger holes in tree trunks may be active nesting holes of those same woodpeckers. Even in death, the forest community finds life.

After a few twists and turns, the trail opens back on the park drive near the parking circle. Trail maps here give you an idea of where you have been and where to head next. This more open area had previously been mowed and maintained as a picnic area, but repeated deposits of large amounts of sand during flooding in recent years lead the Buchanan County Conservation Board to move toward a new management style for this park. Prairie was planted amongst the existing trees and additional trees were also planted with mowing now limited to the trails and a smaller area around the picnic shelter.

Already out and about in the snow, I saw several trails made by mice as they tunneled beneath the new blanket of white - safe from the eagle eyes of predators. One little trail, however, showed not all the mice have yet learned that trick. The tiny footprints were separated by quite a distance as the mouse presumably jumped across the trail opening. Between the tracks was the telltale sign of a tail dragging through the powder (Photo 5).

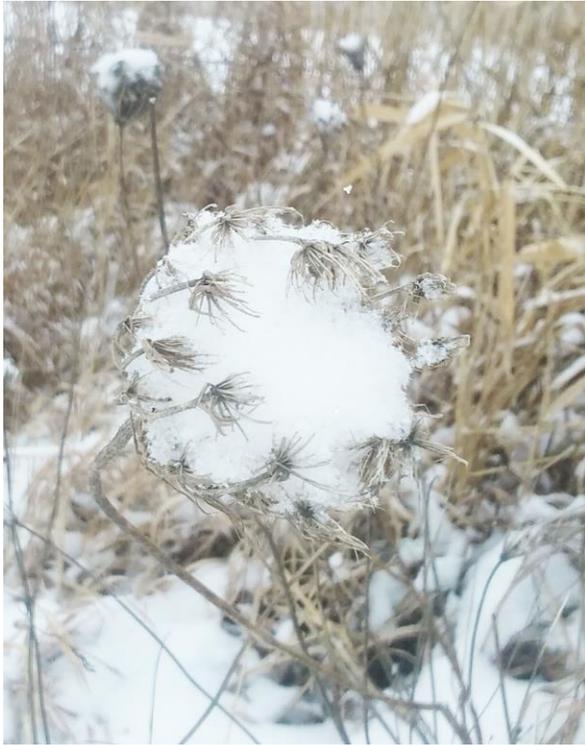


The final stretch of trail parallels D22 and was planted as a windbreak into highbush cranberry. This native shrub provides a welcome splash of color amidst the snowfall (photo 6) and a welcome meal for many birds. Late winter and early spring flocks of robins arriving to herald spring will often feast on the thawing

berries. If the weather has included many rollercoaster weather days of warm and cold, the berries may have fermented by then and the antics of robins feeding on them can be very entertaining.

I made one final pass down the entry lane in hopes of getting a great shot in the prairie parcel on the east side.





The snowfall was by then very heavy and most of my images were not very clear. Looking nearly like another bird nest, I was intrigued with the pattern of the dried stem of Queen Anne's lace – a non-native but naturalized plant often seen along ditches and other disturbed areas. With just a few seeds remaining, the skeleton of the branches enfolded a ball of snow as if it were grabbing a handful to toss (Photo 7).

Being the first major snows of the winter, I have enjoyed getting out and exploring what evidence wildlife has left for us to observe. And the thing about February snows is that you know it can't be long until they melt away and the sights, sounds and smells of spring replace them. Get out and enjoy!

For more information about Buchanan County Conservation Board parks, programs and activities, or to read other editions of 12 months in Buchanan County Parks visit [www.buchanancountyparks.com](http://www.buchanancountyparks.com).