Winter
Trail Guide
to Sapsucker Woods
Winter is a beautiful season to visit Sapsucker Woods. Most trees stand bare, and the branches and bushes are busy with birds searching for food in the frigid landscape. Deer mosey across the frozen pond to nibble at its brushy shores, and the crisp light is a reminder that spring has yet to come.

Listen carefully and you might be rewarded with the “tap-tap-tap” of a foraging woodpecker. Woodpeckers search for insects beneath the bark of dead trees. Smaller woodpeckers chip away at the outermost bark, while larger woodpeckers, such as the Pileated Woodpecker, excavate deep cavities in tree trunks in anticipation of the upcoming breeding season. The clear whistled fee-bee of the Black-capped Chickadee is one of the earliest winter songs heard in Sapsucker Woods.

Although a thick layer of snow seems calm on the surface, a whole world of activity bustles beneath. When snow accumulates, air is trapped between the flakes, creating an insulated environment in which mice, voles, and other small mammals spend their winters burrowing tunnels out of the reach of frigid winter winds.

Deciduous woodlands in winter can seem gray and featureless without leaves. Yet, even without leaves, it is possible to identify many trees and shrubs by their bark. As you walk the trails, look for the shaggy, loose bark of shagbark hickories, the scaled bark of black cherry trees, and the smooth red bark of red osier dogwoods.

Changes in daylength trigger hormones that stimulate birds to sing. As days get longer following the winter solstice, an increasing number of winter birds can be heard belting out their breeding songs or drumming on tree trunks. As days get longer following the winter solstice, an increasing number of winter birds can be heard belting out their breeding songs or drumming on tree trunks.

Because of ice and snow, foraging in winter can be difficult for birds. White-throated Sparrows and other birds eat the seeds left behind as plants die or go dormant for the winter. These bushes and grasses also provide cover from predators.

No one knows for sure why oak and beech trees hold on to their dead leaves for the winter. Some scientists speculate that these trees, relative newcomers to our northern forests, are still adapting to winter; others think the leaves deter deer from browsing.

Both red squirrels and gray squirrels den in tree cavities during the winter, often sharing the space with other squirrels of the same species. Gray squirrels also build two or three leafy nests each (called “drey”) in treetops for loafing and sleeping in warmer conditions.

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