



Life abounds on the colder days of the year

Description

Take the time to watch and enjoy our wildlife during the winter months

By Irwin Rapoport

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It appears that the worst of the annual winter deep freeze is over, and thank the gods. We had several ice-cold days, and the experience of -40 C days is always jarring. No matter how many times we experience them, they are always uncomfortable.

While we dread them, many animals in the Arctic can easily survive them, such as walrus, ringed seals, and bowhead, beluga, and narwhal whales. They thrive in such cold temperatures, as do many fish species and other aquatic life.

Could we, who depend on central heating, survive a day or two the way the Inuit did when they followed traditional lives as nomads and spent their nights in igloos? I doubt it, but it demonstrates how adaptable humans can be to overcome the challenges of their particular environments.

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Local wildlife shows us on a daily basis, during the winter, how it is possible to survive during inclement weather. Groundhogs are true hibernators, so they are sleeping soundly at the moment, as are toads, frogs, and other resident reptiles and amphibians.

Squirrels and rabbits are out there and running about, conserving their energy and taking advantage of wild foods they can find. During the spring, summer, and fall, squirrels cache vast amounts of foods and research has shown that they can remember where most of the acorns and other foods are hidden.



A group of crows atop trees – Image: [OSPAN ALI](#) on [Unsplash](#)

We have several species of birds that reside in Montreal year-round, and more and more often, robins are sighted spending the winter here, realizing that the migration to warmer climates requires a lot of energy. They have learned to adapt and find sources of food to survive. Crows and ravens can make it through the winter months, and it is always a thrill to see thousands of crows fly en masse in the afternoon to that night's roosting site.

There are several flocks of crows in the West End and they communicate with each other very easily, often going about in groups of three or four in search of food during the day. When it comes time to fly to a roosting site, the word is spread rapidly. In Notre Dame de Grace (NDG), there are at least two specific flocks and I have witnessed crows flying to the roosting sites, which sometimes has the extremely intelligent birds taking over an hour to complete the nightly flight. You can hear them cawing as they pass over you. Researchers are learning to identify various sounds and, without question, crows and ravens have developed a language. They most assuredly have a culture, and we can safely state they recognize each other as individuals. I suspect that they have names for each other, and many crows have tight family bonds that extend for generations.

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We have foxes in the West End of Montreal, and I've seen a few in the warmer months, but never in winter. They know where the mice live and are experts at catching them. The squirrels live in nests up in the trees, which are safe from foxes, but are not fortresses when it comes to hawks and owls. When you see squirrels chasing each other, part of that is play, which they enjoy; but it is also excellent practice to learn how to escape from predators.



Squirrel in winter – Image: Tetyana Kovyryna from Pexels

Suffice it to say, winter restricts mobility as wildlife needs to conserve energy but if one is patient and quiet, one can witness life flourish in backyards and parks.

Trees, shrubs, and many plants, wild and those planted in gardens, are dormant and awaiting the return of spring. Our northern trees and wildflowers have evolved to make it through the winter and, as we now know, trees can communicate with each other very effectively and share resources. This is not just with their kind but with other species as well.

So, while the cold weather gives the impression that our wilderness and green spaces are silent, life abounds.

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We can help out our feathered friends by putting out bird feeders with various types of food. While they do not depend on this to survive the lean months, this supplementation helps, and birds know where the feeders are. Squirrels do their best to take advantage of offerings at feeders and are very creative in figuring out how to access them. There are squirrel-proof bird feeders and many can be placed to avoid squirrel raids.

We can easily provide something for squirrels, whose antics amuse us. So have a little consideration for them and for squirrel moms who don't have an easy time looking after four to six baby squirrels (called kits) who are very energetic and curious about the world. I once saw a squirrel mom introduce her six kits to a local park. It was a challenge and a risk, knowing that potential predators were about, but the family got through the experience safely and was able to return home.

Below is an activity this weekend that may whet your appetite for nature observation in winter. It is free, fun for all ages, and open to everyone.



GBBC)

The Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) is encouraging

nature lovers in Quebec to participate in **one of the largest community science projects in the world** this weekend. All they need to do is go outside, listen for cheeps and caws, and watch for birds in their yards, local parks or nature reserves. Who knew contributing to the advancement of science could be so accessible?

The **Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC)** runs from **February 18 to 21**. When participants document their findings through the [eBird app](#), they're contributing vital information that helps experts track the evolution of bird populations. People can use the [free Merlin app](#) – it identifies birds based on what we see and hear!

The GBBC is run by the **Cornell Lab of Ornithology, National Audubon Society** and **Birds Canada**.

For more details on the event, visit birdcount.org

Image: courtesy of Les amis de la montagne

Feature image: cardinal by Harvey Reed from Pexels

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Irwin Rapoport is a freelance journalist.

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