

Winter 2017 NATURE NOTES at Magazine Beach Park

The second of 4 seasonal newsletters funded by the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation, Five Star & Urban Waters Program

WINTER SOLSTICE

We are all feeling the effects of earlier sunsets and later sunrises as the North Pole tilts farther and further from the sun. This trend reverses with the arrival of Winter Solstice, Dec. 21 at 11:28 am, when the sun reaches its southernmost position as seen from earth, then reverses direction, reabling the days to get longer, and long tree shadows to get shorter.

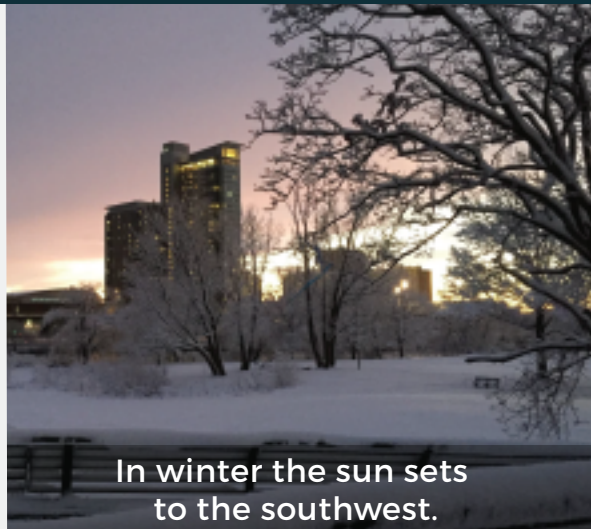
Early sunsets viewed from the BU Bridge are one highlight of the changing season. The river, deep blue in the darkening light, meets the indigo sky and lights illumine the water's edge.

LOOK FOR TRACKS

Fresh winter snow provides a great viewing ground for finding and identifying animal tracks. If you get out before the dogs take their morning walk, they are easier to see. But even if the dogs beat you, rabbit tracks are still visible. Our cottontail rabbit populations are recovering after the very cold winter of 2014-2015, where kills by hawks left bloody marks in the snow along the hedge all winter and numbers declined noticeably.

Cottontails are the only rabbits that do not use burrows. Instead, they live in tall grasses, making simple nests in ground vegetation. One of the adaptations cottontails have developed to survive living so exposed is nearly 360-degree vision: their only blind spot is on the bridge of their nose. Most of this impressive vision is devoted to scanning the sky for predators.

Rabbit tracks typically appear as two larger elongated ovals side by side followed by two smaller ovals, one behind the other. This configuration happens because the rabbits place the two smaller front feet on the ground first, then swing their large back feet forward in front of their front feet to complete the stride. When a rabbit moves very quickly the track is more triangular as in the photo.



In winter the sun sets to the southwest.



Cottontails on the run.
Photo courtesy of Jonah Evans,
www.naturetracking.com

WINTER BIRDS

Ring-billed gulls and great black-backed gulls have returned from their annual summers in the Arctic. When the river ices over they are easy to see perched on the ice at patches of open water. Tree and fox sparrows also come from the north to winter at balmy Magazine Beach. Our year-round stalwarts are still on view: slate-colored juncos, tufted titmice, song sparrows, chickadees, mockingbirds, house finches, northern cardinals and gold finches are prominent among them.

Blue Jays have taken up their winter role as sentinels, sending out warnings when a predator, dog, or human appears threatening. Speaking of predators, small numbers of red-tailed hawks, cooper's hawks and rough-legged hawks fly through looking for small rodents to eat. Flocks of cormorants fly past in the morning, most of them headed upstream in search of fish. Finally, great blue herons occasionally delight by flying over the BU bridge just aftersunrise and take up fishing positions on opposite sides of the river at water's edge. (They increasingly stay for the winter, too.)



Ring-billed gull

Great black-backed gull

THE BIOSWALE RENOVATION

Volunteers have been hard at work removing invasive phragmites from the stormwater treatment wetlands at the park. In 2017, almost 350 people have helped dig up the aggressive roots of these plants, called rhizomes, which try to spread and grow new shoots every spring.

To help discourage any rhizomes that have been left in the ground from growing, we have covered the swale with black tarp that blocks out the light. We will leave it in place for two years to ensure that the rhizomes die. It is very windy at Magazine Beach, so we have both pinned the tarps into the ground and weighed them down with rocks and old bricks. Help us make this project a success by walking around the wetlands, not through them. (Dogs, too!) Also, please email magazinebeach@gmail.com if you see that the tarps have become loose or damaged. Look for wildflowers here in the years to come.



The black tarp will discourage the phragmites from re-emerging. Wildflowers next!

Magazine Beach Partners, a newly created 501c3, is dedicated to working with the Massachusetts Department of Conservation & Recreation (DCR) and the City of Cambridge to revitalize Magazine Beach Park—the City's second largest park. We support the preservation of this wonderful green open space. To learn more, go to: magazinebeach.org.