

VILLAGE VIEW

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VILLAGE ADVERTISER January 13, 1983

Winter begins, scientists say, when the earth tilts on its axis as far as it will. From our viewpoint, earth spins its wobbly way in orbit around the sun, leaning first north, then south, and with winter's arrival, the sun appears to stand still, directly over the Tropic of Cancer.

Every winter cold weather clasps its grip on the part of the hemisphere north of that imaginary line. December brings frost, sleet, even snow storms. The season's days and nights are cold, despite forecasters' predictions of milder than usual weather in the northeast this year. Doubtless January thaws will bring warm days, but winter isn't apt to give way to spring without serving up at least a taste of its rigors. Watch out for February and March.

Even with icy winds and some snow storms, Cape Codders are sure to experience days when the sun shines brightly and, as the days lengthen, gives enough warmth to entice you outside for a walk. Joggers will sprint along roadsides; golfers will set forth on an 18-hole hike. You, too, may be tempted to wander a woodland path, fill your lungs with fresh air, and enjoy a good tramp.

Do take a walk. It's good for you. And, besides, there is plenty to see if you know what to look for, so dress warmly, wear stout boots on your feet, mittens on your hands, scarf around your neck, and a hat to conserve body heat. You can always loosen clothing to cool off.

As you start out on your chosen path, take note of the trees. Oaks, the most common kind in our area, still hold their leaves although the foliage is dead. Once American chestnuts were the dominant growth, but disease wiped them out early in the twentieth century.

Beech trees, although infrequently found growing naturally on the Cape, also keep their wispy pale leaves until spring's new growth begins. Should you find a grove of tall beeches, imagine how early explorers of Ohio and Indiana must have felt as they followed the rivers westward. Surrounded by mile after mile of towering beech, they walked a forest floor bare of undergrowth. So thick was the shade beneath beech trees, no seedlings took root. Small beeches, sometimes seen growing under a big tree, aren't seedlings, but suckers, sprouting from the tree's roots. Should the mother tree die, the suckers will shoot up to take her place.

Beechnuts, four-parted fruit encased in a prickly pod, are edible. It is believed the now-extinct passenger pigeon was the only means of long-distance beech seed dispersal; beechnuts were the bird's favorite food. This may be one reason beech groves are found on the Cape.

Other trees, although bare of foliage this time of year, carry next year's leaves wrapped in their buds. Formed last summer, buds come in many shapes, sizes and colors. Those of the beech are long and sharp. Red maple buds are round and bright red. Sassafras twig-tips are green; dogwoods bear buds shaped like tiny pagodas.

Look, really look, at the bark of trees. Can you identify a tree by the appearance of its trunk? With practice, you can. Dogwood bark grows in rectangles, neat and trim; pitch pine bark is soft and shaggy-looking, breaks off easily and crumbles in your hand. White pine bark is smooth and pliable on young trees; on mature ones, the bark is coarse and rough. White ash bark forms huge diamond-shaped crosses. A young cherry tree's bark is reddish-brown, smooth, and marked horizontally with lines encircling the trunk. On older cherries, the grayish bark splits vertically, curls outward in long ridges. The birches, whether gray, yellow, or white, are easily identified by the distinctive black marks on their slender graceful trunks.

Tree fruits are most easily spotted in early winter after the leaves have fallen. Poplar fruits stick up, looking like little tulips; although the tulip poplar is more often found south of New York City than in New England, some do grow on the Cape. Pines bear fruit, too, of course; their cones contain, beneath each segmented spine, a winged seed capable of producing a new tree. Acorns, fruits of oaks, come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes, depending upon the type of oak that bore it.

Berries, shrub fruits, lend color to winter woodlands. Black alder, which you'll find in damp, swampy places, carry red berries, easily spotted in January. These strongly resemble holly berries. Some people call black alder "winterberry," but this appellation should be reserved for hollies (*Ilex*), another native of our Cape Cod woodlands. Clusters of gray waxy bayberries help identify the parent plant even though its pungent leaves are gone. Birds, dependent on the fat in bayberries for warmth, will strip this fruit from the bushes as soon as cold weather comes.

Let your eyes roam the ground as you shuffle through fallen leaves; near your feet are remains of weeds and wildflowers. You might gather some for a winter bouquet. Although flesh and color have been drained by frost, skeletons of aster, goldenrod, and Queen Anne's lace flowerheads (now cupped like birds' nests) offer different shapes. Blackened stalks of milkweed, fuzzy spikes of cattails, and twisted tendrils of bittersweet will combine to give height and grace to your arrangement.

Bend down and poke around under the carpet of leaves at the base of dead stalks to find rosettes of green attached to frost-bound roots. This greenery will survive all the snow and bitter cold winter can deliver. Come spring, dandelions, buttercups, bouncing Bet, and the wildflower called butter-and-eggs from which snapdragons were developed, will emerge from the roots.

Look for signs that our four-footed friends have passed this way. On a snow-covered path, tracks of rabbits, squirrels, raccoons, mice, and deer are easily spotted. Each differs from every other, and you can learn to recognize the sign left by each animal scurrying through the underbrush seeking food after a storm.

Birds that winter-over on the Cape leave their footprints in the snow. Crows, pheasant, quail, blue jays, chickadees, juncos, and cardinals are some of these. All make distinctive marks. If the ground is bare and muddy, look for their tracks near streams and wetlands.

And as you walk and look and discover, compare the beauties of winter's wonderland, the woodland, this time of year, with the sights a city-dweller might find should he venture out after a storm. Which would you rather find? Manikins wrapped in furs or draped in cruisewear displayed in store-front windows? Or a covey of quail huddling in a circle to keep warm under the low-spreading branches of a middling-sized white pine tree?