

The Wonderful Winter Woodlands

By Greg Sykes (greg@grsykes.com)

Winter might get folks complaining about snow or freezing temperatures, but when they grumble how everything looks “dead” outside, *au contraire!* If you know where to look, the winter landscape offers a revealing angle on Mother Nature. Take the hooded mergansers (*Lophodytes cucullatus*) as our first example. Whereas these ducks are year-round Northern Virginia residents, November’s chill ushers them to Royal Lake where they stay until spring unless the pond freezes completely over. This carnivorous bird must have liquid water access so that it can dive for fish and other aquatic creatures; the saw-like ridges along the bill act like teeth enabling mergansers to clasp prey. At this time of year, the males flaunt conspicuous breeding plumage, most notably a risible crest with a white patch on an otherwise black head. Hooded mergansers are smaller and far shyer than common mallards.

Winter’s leafless forests and marshes permit us to better study year-round residents, such as hawks, cardinals (*Cardinalis cardinalis*), great blue herons (*Ardea herodias*), Carolina wrens (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*), and crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*)—one of the most intelligent bird species. Watch how that dead tree—riddled with holes and rot—is visited by black-capped chickadees (*Poecile atricapillus*), white-breasted nuthatches (*Sitta carolinensis*), tufted titmice (*Baeolophus bicolor*), and many woodpecker species as they investigate future nesting hallows, shelter within cavities, or peck for food. Since even snags afford wildlife with valuable habitat, they are left standing in the parks unless posing a risk to people or property. In addition to year-round residents, some migratory birds enjoy a day-long rest stop at Royal Lake. Keep your eyes open by the water for northern shovelers (*Anas clypeata*) and Caspian terns (*Hydroprogne caspia*)—the world’s largest tern. Catch a glimpse of warblers and eastern bluebirds (*Sialia sialis*) fleeing amongst the branches.

A common misconception is how dormant trees look boring and lifeless. Such sentiments fail to acknowledge the buds surrounding us ready to burst forth at spring’s arrival. In years past, artists restocked some of their supplies during the winter: the long, velvety pawpaw buds (*Asimina triloba*) provided fine paintbrushes for detailed artwork. Speaking of trees and aesthetics, winter is the time to appreciate tree bark’s beauty! While people frequently focus on a native tree’s foliage, fruits, or flowers, species praised for their ornamental bark include the scale-like American sycamores (*Platanus occidentalis*), papery river birches (*Betula nigra*), muscular ironwoods (*Carpinus caroliniana*), gator skin flowering dogwoods (*Cornus florida*), and warty common hackberries (*Celtis occidentalis*).

Here’s another botanical surprise: the [crane fly orchid](#) (*Tipularia discolor*) only sends out leaves in late fall and keeps them out during the winter. Unlike true evergreens, the spotted leaves with purple undersides die back as the weather warms, then the leafless plant blooms in July. With scrawny, brown, moth-pollinated flowers (looking like crane flies), the foliage may be considered this plant’s most ornamental feature. Crane fly orchids live in undisturbed, older growth areas.

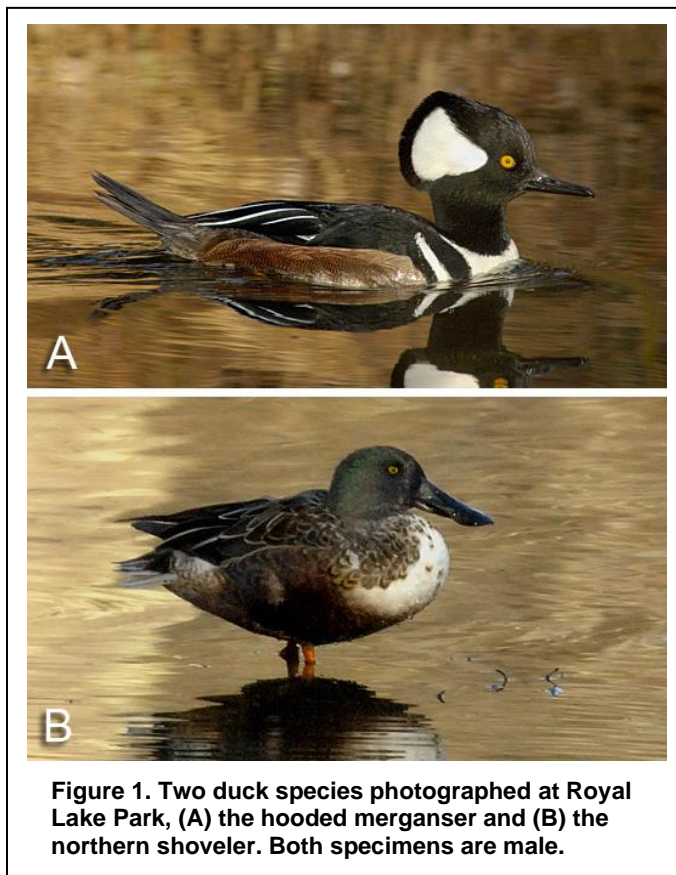


Figure 1. Two duck species photographed at Royal Lake Park, (A) the hooded merganser and (B) the northern shoveler. Both specimens are male.

After this wintery introduction to Royal Lake, come see seasonal organisms and habitats for yourself! I will host a free nature walk on Saturday, January 26, 2013, from 10:00-noon. Participants should be healthy and at least 11 years old (ages 11-15 must bring a parent); biological experience level is from beginner to ecology professors. Come dressed for the weather wearing good walking shoes or hiking boots. Take along binoculars, a note pad, a pen, and an open mind. Space is limited, so contact me at greg@grsykes.com to register and receive the meeting location. Let's see what we can discover!

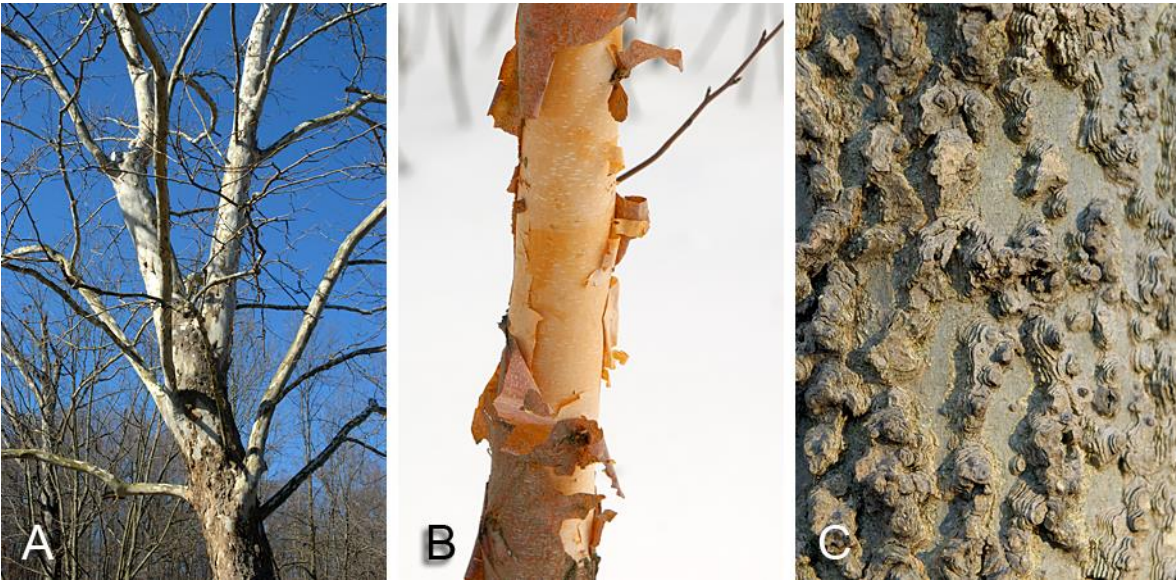


Figure 2. Native trees exhibiting ornamental bark include (A) sycamores, (B) river birches (young tree seen here), and (C) hackberries.

* * * * *