



WINTER

A SEASON AT THE
CELERY FARM NATURAL AREA

R. H. KANE

FIRST IN A SERIES REMEMBERING A YEAR AT THE CELERY FARM

The beginning of a year at the Celery Farm, Allendale NJ

WINTER

A SEASON AT THE CELERY FARM
NATURAL AREA

Cover photograph: Lake Appert Shoreline, frozen, from Pirie Platform

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY R. H. KANE

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INTRODUCTION

Mother Earth usually treats us fairly in northern New Jersey, even if we haven't always reciprocated. We do complain about a heat wave or two in summer, and a few messy snowfalls in winter, but basically we get thirty to forty weeks of moderate weather during the year. With few (memorable) exceptions, we don't worry about earthquakes, mudslides, tornadoes, hurricanes, wildfires, dust storms, searing heat, really frigid cold, extended drought, ice storms, or life-changing floods, and we enjoy four distinct and comparatively temperate seasons.

Compared with what our ancestors endured, we experience this seasonal cycle only superficially in modern life. We isolate ourselves from discomfort by wearing Polartec and turning up the furnace in winter, screening our windows in spring, and air-conditioning everything with a roof in summer. We have the Weather Chan-

nel, and whatever climate extremes happen are just inconveniences and every year passes without any particular worry about food, shelter, parasites, predators, insects, or disease—things that other creatures face starkly and alone as the seasons change.

So for most of us, the natural world and how the seasons affect wildlife go unnoticed; a hawk hunting or a turkey family foraging in the 'burbs is rare and mostly unobserved, deer damage may be the only evidence that a creature has passed by, and most suburbanites live their whole lives without ever seeing a weasel, fox or coyote. Mostly we notice only the trivia—birds leaving in the fall, stumbling upon an occasional bird's nest in spring, or the evidence of a hungry raccoon having gotten aggressive with our garbage. But some suburban residents are better tuned in, and can get close to wildlife in surprising places.

The Celery Farm Natural Area, for instance, sits near the northwest corner of one of the most densely populated counties in the most densely populated state. This tiny preserve—something over 100 acres—rests in a slight hollow along a relatively busy county road, where a creek or two and runoff fill a shallow pond. Egrets, herons, waterfowl, and songbirds are frequent visitors to this former farmstead, and although the scope and variety of its birds and wildlife doesn't compare with Cape May, Brigantine, or some other popular birding spots in New Jersey, there is enough to draw serious birders and photographers, and to generate much passion for the place.

You may read about this unlikely preserve and its rescue from suburban development in Barack and Wright (*In the Presence of Nature: the Celery Farm Natural Area, Allendale, New Jersey*; Camino Books 2002). The progression of its history over two centuries was to have been peat mine to working farm to McMansions, only foiled by the efforts of a few dedicated individuals such as Stiles Thomas and Mayor FitzPatrick some forty years ago. With the support of the citizens

of Allendale, they rescued the Celery Farm for the creatures that live there and for those of us who enjoy it so much, and incidentally saved the potential future residents from the angst of very wet basements.

This photographic essay, *Winter*, is the first in a series to chronicle a year at the Celery Farm by season. Not a winter in a specific year, rather it is an average record of seasonal changes in wildlife and environment recorded in images collected between 2005 and 2012. As you will learn if you read the notes on photographing there in the Appendix, photographic opportunities come sporadically; a single given year may yield much, others little or nothing of value, and winter is the least productive season. The collection for the series represents the results of close to a thousand shooting visits during the course of over eight years (and counting).

Should you be unfamiliar with the place, it may be helpful to take the short tour of the Celery Farm that follows before beginning the photo essay. No obligation, though; the book does not depend on it.



Lake Appert in late November, newly frozen

A CELERY FARM VISIT

Should you wish to drop by, aim northwest from New York City to Allendale, not quite 25 miles away. Follow Franklin Turnpike north past Allendale Avenue and Cottage Place, and look for a small dirt parking area on the right. If it's not a weekend morning, you can find a space easily. Stop at the kiosk to read about daily wildlife sightings and look at the lost-and-found stuff. Check the notices for the rules and grab a bird checklist if the box isn't empty. Now walk across a plank bridge and head down the path. You are starting on a trail around Lake Appert; it's just a low spot fed by some little streams, and large stretches are shal-

low enough for herons to stand in. You will be back at the kiosk in about a mile and a furlong. There are detours to Blue Heron Pond to the east and Phair's Pond at the north end that will add maybe another half-mile. So distance is no barrier to access for nearly anyone. Find a handy map if you click this link to the [Fyke](#) site for reference. In the recent past, the place was indeed a farm, and what is now Lake Appert were fields which could be irrigated easily. Sometimes too easily, by reputable account, and to this day the preserve is occasionally flooded. In summer, even when it's been dry for weeks, one can find patches of damp earth or even mud here and there along the trails as water seeps up through the peaty soil. In the spring and fall, mud is a given. And in winter, paths are crusted over with



ice or with half-melted slush and, of course, there is mud during a thaw. Recent attempt to civilize the paths with wood chips seem to me doomed as the wood appears to break down and decompose at about the same rate as it can be spread. And the chips break down to mud. Hope you have appropriate footwear. Rubber is not a bad three-season choice.

We can take both broader and closer looks from the air. Taking a long view, we see that the Celery Farm is indeed in suburbia. We are looking west. The shopping center sits alongside the old Erie mainline, Crestwood Park and its swimming area are at the top, and we see condos and industrial/office buildings at the lower right.



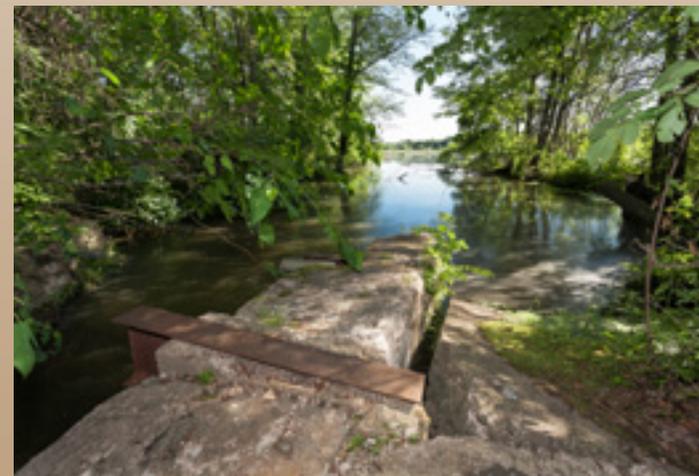
Aerial views of the Celery Farm in the summer of 2011, looking NNE above Franklin Turnpike. Phair's pond is at the top, Blue Heron pond is at right.



At the far left find a view similar to that on the Fyke map; you can relate many of the features listed to the aerial view. Coming closer, find the Allendale Brook, and the path that runs alongside, hidden but showing up as a thin line through the trees near the eastern shore. The Pirie Platform is also hidden in the trees near the end of the driveway outside the preserve, and Blue Heron Pond is at the top. This was a summer flight during a period of relatively low water, conditions anticipated by birders eager to find shore birds. Below, a view of the western side of the pond shows the channel to the culvert and the muddy shore, split repeatedly by water intrusion. The circle near the top identifies a lone walker headed for Barking Dog Corner, bound to the path by phragmites on his left that may be eight feet tall and by a field of cattails on his right; the other circle surrounds an egret fishing (trust me), well out of range and view of photographers. The phrags in the bulk of the view are greener than the rest at this time of year in the wetter depressions, the remains of the old irrigation channels.



Shore of Lake Appert looking WNW. No Name Culvert is at the right, at the end of the channel.



But back to the tour. Walk a bit down the trail from the kiosk and cross a bridge over the little weir. This outlet from Lake Appert feeds into a little stream that joins the Allendale brook a few dozen yards to the south. You can now go either left or right. Left brings you out on a point with a viewing platform, the Warden's Watch; the panorama at the start of this section is what you will see. It's a favorite with photographers on weekend mornings, at least in years when there's enough to shoot. These are often just social occasions, since photo opportunities are seasonal and episodic.

In warmer weather, especially early in the morning, you may have to muscle your way past the half-sleeping Canada geese (another reason not to wear sandals) to reach the platform. Sometimes, in the spring, one will be happy to have carried a tripod or umbrella to ward off a nest guard. here may be an egret on the brush pile thirty yards away, phoebes on the point to the left, warblers in the trees behind, fish jumping, snapping turtle

snouts sticking above the water, and swallows working to keep the bugs under control. If you're lucky, a black-crowned night heron will be feeding off to the right. A great blue heron or two will be standing in the water, and there will usually be some ducks. Swans, immature or bachelors, sometimes show up for a day or two, but single pairs have stayed and nested successfully for each of the past several years.

Retrace your steps and continue around the bottom of the pond to reach the Holly Grove, which, depending on how recently it has been tended, may provide a nice view of the hollies above some blooms, often garlic mustard in flower. This attractive nuisance seems to have an unbreakable hold on the Preserve, and can be found everywhere. It is tasty, and there are pesto and salad [recipes](#) using it. Just ahead turn north along the Allendale Brook to find "Warbler Alley" and the Pirie Platform, scene of Sunday morning's Hour-On-The-Tower where a group of serious birders gather for a count.

Early in the morning the light is nice here for photography, and changes in vegetation with



The Holly Grove



Along the brook toward the Pirie platform



Early summer view from the Pirie Platform



Looking south from the Scout platform in early fall

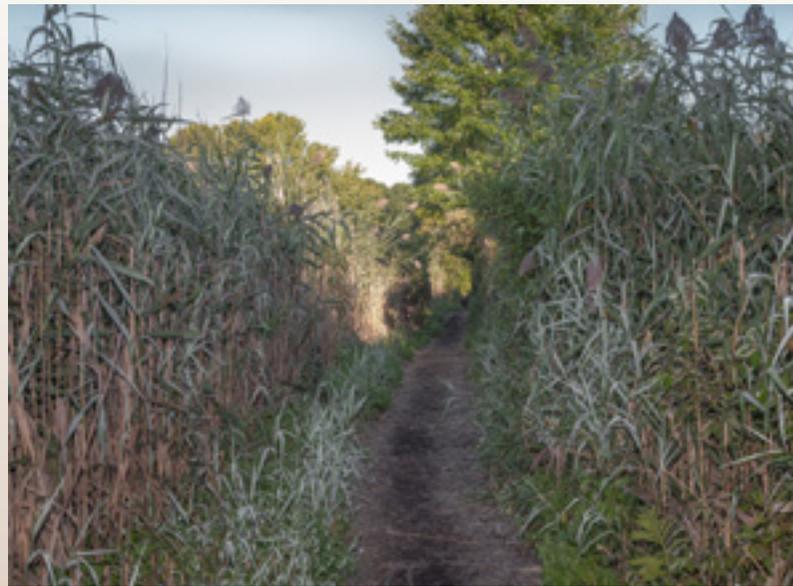
the seasons give different opportunities. Spring is best; the exuberant growth of summer hasn't clogged up the view, and snipe and bitterns may show themselves to (extremely) lucky observers.

Continuing north, reach a fork. To the right, see Brotherton Bridge across the brook that will take you to Blue Heron Pond. The path there is tight and less frequently used, but if you are stealthy you may be rewarded. Long pants give at least some security against ticks. Make a noise and the egrets and herons will bolt. Back on the main path, the trail roughly traces the outline of the pond. At another fork the right road leads to a path going to the northern-most part of the reserve, all woodland where great horned owls have been reported, and to Phair's Pond and the Greenway entrance. A wildflower garden (a work in progress) sits in this open area and a red chestnut tree stands alone, becoming a hummingbird magnet when it blooms in early May.

Coming back from Phair's to the main path, bear right to Pink Potty Bridge (a toilet was dragged out here during a clean-up years ago) and the Troop 59 (informally, the Scout) Platform,

both at the north end of the Lake. The Warden's Watch is visible across the pond less than half a mile away. Cattails will obstruct the view from the bridge in summer. Less than a hundred yards along the path between stands of phragmites you reach the Butterfly Garden, the only cultivated patch in the preserve. An ancient tractor rusts quietly nearby, and harrow parts and bits of a plow are visible when the brush is down, all remnants of the old farm. The path to the south is open and pleasant. Goldfinches in late summer and cedar waxwings in fall are common, and it's a good place to find yellow warblers. They often nest here. A buried culvert connects a ditch to the pond and the marshy area to the right. There may be muskrat in the water, or a snapper covered with duckweed, or, far less commonly, a Virginia rail—at least in seasons when vegetation hasn't obscured the channel. A loud splash from some surprised creature may surprise you as well. Neither of you will be any wiser about the other.

The rest of the path provides more exercise than wildlife viewing, but the expert birders may do well here. It bends west to Barking Dog corner,



Toward the Butterfly Garden, late summer



where a happy golden retriever used to announce himself to everyone on the path, then south into and along the Dead Zone where very little seems to show itself. In spring, though, you may be lucky enough to find a Jack-in-the pulpit. Now we're back at the kiosk. Lots of choices. Go home for hot coffee (good idea in winter), back to the Warden's Watch to see if anything or anyone flew in that we've missed, put on running shoes and do a couple more laps (not for me, thanks). Maybe drive to the Greenway entrance for another look at Phair's. Or just plan to come back later in the day.

You may have been surprised that you were alone most of the time. On winter mornings, in fact, you may be the only one in the preserve. But late afternoons, spring through fall, can bring teenage track runners, little kids jammed into strollers or on the loose, walkers, joggers, whole families, and who knows what. It's a frustrating time to look for wildlife, and best avoided anyway. Weekends after 9 AM also qualify. Weekday mornings, early, are my favorite times for both solitude and photography.

Even long-time visitors seldom conceptualize how little of the Celery Farm we can actually see, never mind photograph. The limited vistas and rigid trail structure restrict us to just a fraction of the Preserve. Access to the water seems to shrink every year. The paths are often physically confining and seem to become narrower each summer; tall grasses, phragmites, and cattails obstruct our views more than ever. It's been while since the Duck Observatory was anything like an observatory, for example; it is now a wall of phrags. Rightly, informal trails to water's edge have been roped off to discourage random trampling, and we do need to remember, often grudgingly, that it is not a park. We still have the three viewing platforms and the Norman and Pena benches available for pond viewing; nature will do what it will do and we have to accept what we can get.

The limitations for photographers are sometimes frustrating, though. Sight lines into habitats across the pond are cut off by the remnants of cultivation, and by the growth of phragmites and trees, especially irksome around the Pirie platform. Views of the pond from near the Scout platform are shrinking every year, making photography more and more challenging. Birders may be satisfied with seeing a specimen behind foliage, or even only hearing it, but a decent photograph requires some degree of proximity and freedom from obstruction that is increasingly difficult to achieve.

This book is about seasonal changes, but these aren't the only changes altering the landscape; the Celery Farm is not a static environment. Evidence of former cultivation has been fading since the 1960s and will be almost unrecognizable in a few more decades. Flooding, new growth, decay, climate variations, and other natural processes may also alter the landscape from year to year. It's quite possible that the pond will silt up and be forgotten in a century or so, filled completely with cattails and phragmites. The aerial photographs here taken about 15 years apart show how the Big Ditch is widening, the beds in the Bajor section of the old farm are disappearing, and tuffets in the lake are shrinking, just as examples. Had the recent aerial shots been taken during a wetter season the differences would be even more marked. Purple loosestrife, in much of the landscape in the early image, had become even more widespread before being fully controlled a few years ago by the introduction of predatory beetles. It has reappeared, though it will no doubt fade again as the bugs multiply in response. There have been



Aerial view in the mid-1990's. Courtesy of Jerry Barrack

noticeable changes just since work on this book began. You can view an intermediate Google Earth satellite image on the Web, probably from about 2005.

The present color of the water draws one's attention. Shallower areas near the shoreline are bluish-gray while the deeper parts are brown and turbid. Even at the shore one can satisfy himself about the lack of water clarity just by putting a stick into it. There are few or no aquatic plants and reeds in the water along the shore; things like marsh pennywort and duckweed do flourish, but both extend above water and have all the light they can use. All these symptoms point to the pond being, technically, hypereutrophic—literally, excessively well-nourished—likely attributable to nutrient-rich runoff into the pond, and through a chain of events this leads to low dissolved

oxygen content and limited diversity of plants and fish. Because of the turbidity there may not be enough sunlight to encourage plant growth at the bottom which would generate oxygen, even though the pond is very shallow. The algae will, but decomposition of dead algae masses uses more than is produced. Why is Lake Appert so murky? Without analyses for total chlorophyll and dissolved oxygen we have no firm answer, but algae, in all likelihood, contributes. From the air, one may see swimming geese leaving trails in the water behind them. [Well-documented experiences](#) in Minnesota and elsewhere suggest that carp are commonly at least partially responsible, by churning the bottom and pushing sediment into the water column. Snapping turtles may add to that, and there are plenty of carp and plenty of snappers, and some very large specimens of each, in the pond.

Often, carp can be seen “piping” at the surface, coating their gills with oxygen—a behavior often noted in shallow, low oxygen, hypereutrophic lakes. There have been fish kills here in the recent past, as well. Carp are especially tolerant of these conditions, but few other species are able to cope, and even carp will sometimes need to pipe. It’s possible that these changes have led to what every photographer will agree upon: that there are far fewer wading birds, cormorants, and osprey dives than there were just a few years ago. It is unlikely

that this book could have been prepared if the photographic work were just starting. That isn’t to say that there are no opportunities now, but they are rarer than in the past.

So that’s a tour of this small world, what you would see on your first visit. It is more than just a path around a pond, as will learn as you sharpen your eye on later visits, and everyone who gets to know it will, of course, see it differently. To learn what others think, and keep current with sightings and news, you may wish check www.celeryfarm.net often, and perhaps join or contribute to the Fyke Nature Association.

After this rather long-winded introduction, if potential photographic frustration hasn’t deterred you, come and visit. Bring your camera anyway, At the very least you can count on a walk in a quiet place, but always with the chance of finding something to shoot. And you might find helpful the notes on photographing here to be found at the end of the book, and notes on the photographs follow that. If you haven’t noticed so far, web links are active and shown in blue.

Let’s begin this part of a journey through the year with the least attractive time to visit. Here is your own private tour through a Celery Farm winter. Please be considerate of trails and residents.



Morning view of Lake Appert from the Warden’s Watch, Autumn

WINTER

Hours of daylight diminish quickly in late October, but it is a wonderful time here. Sunrises at the Celery Farm are far more accessible to late risers than they were in June, saturating the landscape in magenta. The remaining leaves have nearly lost color and the nights are chilly. In the morning the pond will be crowded with ducks and other waterfowl that have dropped in during the previous evening, and sunrise may bring explosions of blackbirds from the phrags beyond the west shore. With the night air cooled, mists will have risen from the water and persist until the early sunlight reaches over the trees to burn them away. The swallows have long departed and the list of temporary residents has dwindled. Kingfishers, though, may still zip across the water, and cardinals, robins, and wrens are about. A few remaining loosestrife blooms on tuffets just off the water's edge still show occasional splashes of color.

Swans have nested here for much of the past decade. You may see them taking warmup flights around the pond and into the neighborhood. One

day soon they simply do not come back, all with no warning, gone until spring. Should offspring have survived, against very steep odds, they will have been left to manage on their own. There will have been no goodbyes.

When high water makes wading difficult, egrets and great blue herons may roost in trees along the west shore, contrasting nicely with the remaining foliage. They make for a long shot, but we photograph anyway. Nearly all will leave in a short while. Milk-



weed pods have already broken open. The fluff that photographers love has blown away and only mildewed stalks and a few drying husks remain. The colorful beetles that covered the pods have vanished. Snapping turtles, overly abundant lately, have been tucking themselves in the muddy bottom for the winter. Crabapples have ripened, and the yet-uneaten ones will shrivel and ferment until the last of the cedar waxwings finds them. It will feel much colder than it did in the parking lot. You will be underdressed and chilled; you will remember to dress more warmly next visit.

Toward late November the wind will be up and the sky may be just lead-grey. Only a few trees will show color and the cold may be bone-chilling. We aren't acclimated yet. Return in just a day or two and the trees seem more bare, the color even more faded. Finally, the trees will have dropped everything to leave the Preserve a dull grey-brown, a prelude to another Jersey-drab winter. Without the foliage the place is starkly bare; new places seem to have just popped into existence.

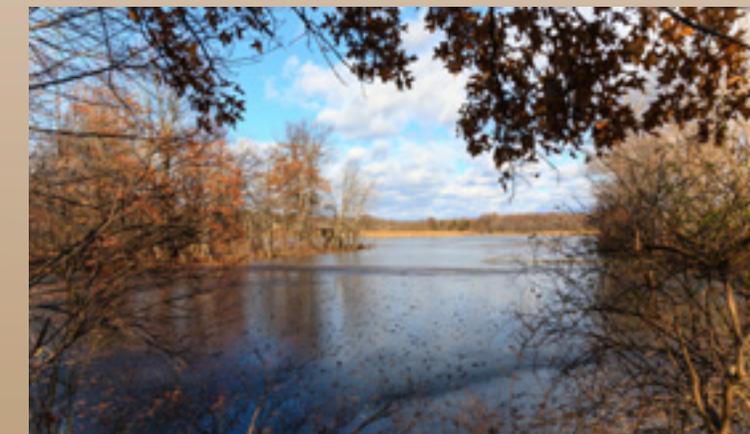




Migrants travel over the Preserve. Snow geese are sometimes seen, and bald eagles are a rare possibility.

Winter may decide to settle in slowly, as it sometimes does here, but it is relentless. A cold snap can ice-over the pond well before December arrives, although in some years the water will remain clear of ice even after Christmas. In these phony winters, sometimes well into January, the reality of bitter cold seems far off, but it will come. The paths are crunchy with frost in the morning, and the Preserve becomes quieter. In years with an early freeze, the ice will be littered with brown leaves, blown from what had remained on the trees.

With a hard freeze, if it is early and long enough, the color of leaves trapped in the ice will be preserved for a while.





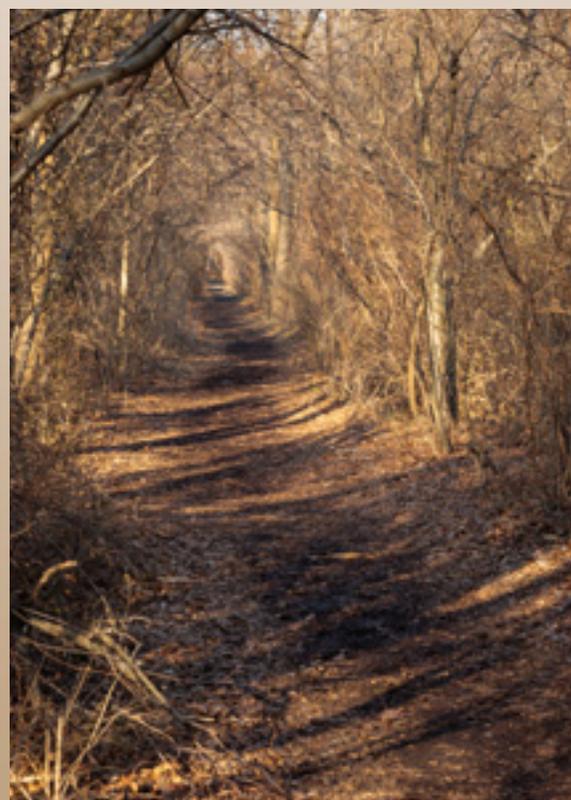
The red-tailed hawks are hungry, and vigilant. With foliage gone they enjoy unobstructed observation decks to survey what is now a dreary landscape. A frequent visitor might notice them several times a week anywhere in the Preserve, and it is always a delight to see them soaring overhead. But it is sobering to find a red-tail feeding. Guiltless chipmunks, rabbits, and squirrels are simply a link lower down in a long food chain.





Now that the trees are bare, the nests abandoned in spring become obvious. Some are surprisingly close to the trail. How were they not discovered? Robins have even nested at the edge of the parking area.

With early snow gone, if it has fallen yet at all, the paths are a uniform gray-brown. Many of the cattails have collapsed, worn out over the past three seasons; sparrows and finches mirror the drab landscape colors. On mornings after warmer days





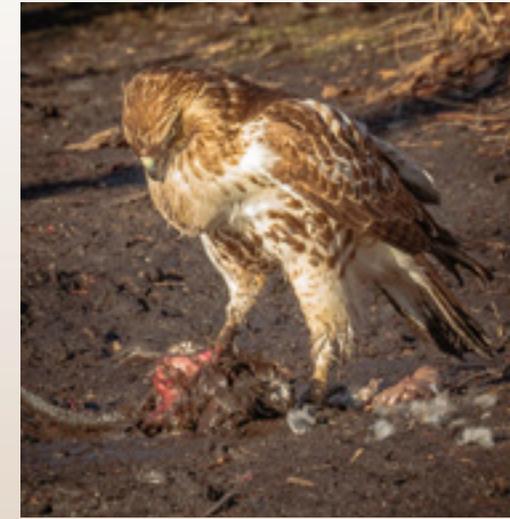
when the trails become less crusty you may find deer tracks in the shallow mud. Arriving just after daybreak you may stumble upon them on the trail, or catch a quick glimpse through the reeds if you are sharp-eyed and lucky. They may be traveling on their game trails that only the residents are allowed to use, winding through the reeds and phrags, or just taking the paths.

Warmer mornings bring a low mist may rise from the damp ground. It is lovely on the landscape but sometimes,



even with the sun trying to break through, it may be depressing at the same. Later in the year with spring approaching it will seem less so, but for now we know a long winter is ahead.

Activity in the Preserve has diminished, but hasn't disappeared. There are still a few rose hips and shriveled crabapples for the cedar waxwings to salvage. Small flocks move about the Celery Farm, often into January. Mild fermentation provides a crabapple high and sometimes a feeding frenzy as well, provoking acrobatics in the air and, perhaps, red droppings in the snow. Cardinals now stand out, even the females, especially if it has snowed. They puff up in the wind, never having thought to move south. Winter-hardy white-throated sparrows bounce along the ground and in and out of low shrubbery. White and yellow trim on dowdy sparrow bodies can cheer you up a bit. Mourning doves may overwinter, squeaking as they take off ahead of you. Sunday morning birders will have given up the formal meetings by now, the list of sightings having dwindled to just the winter stalwarts over the past month.



On a very lucky day you may surprise a muskrat swimming in the brook. When he notices you he will submerge like a dropped rock, or race to find refuge under an ice patch before you get too close. His size is no match for the hawks, though, should he leave the water and try his luck in the open. The kill might be quick, but the meal is unhurried. It may be too large a serving for one sitting, and the red-tail will need to rest on a branch above its kill to manage a heavy crop and watch over its second course.



After the foggy mornings of late autumn, crisp and clear weather becomes more common in the cold. Somehow it can seem more pleasant, if the wind is not too fierce, even though temperatures may be much lower. But even though the sun has begun its northern journey it is more likely to be bitterly cold in the morning. Motivation for a birder or photographer to get out of bed for sunrise is lost, even if there were there good reasons to do so. As consolation, the winter light is still wonderful for shooting almost throughout the day.

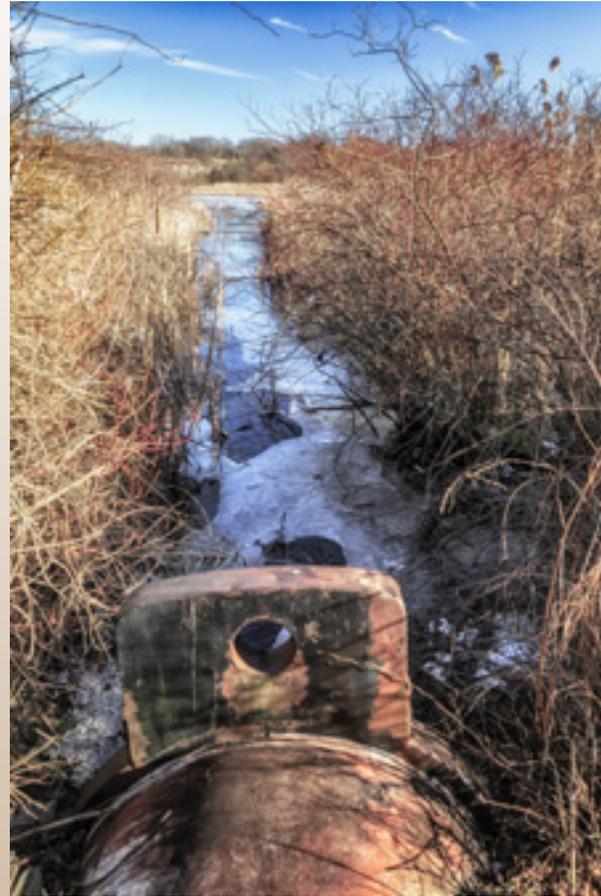
Not just the sparrows and cardinals fluff themselves in the cold wind. The red-tails feel it as well. They are not the only predators in the Preserve. An unlucky titmouse or sparrow may cross paths with a sharpie, with just some



feathers left as a monument. Foxes are hunting too, but even a brief sighting will be at a great distance.

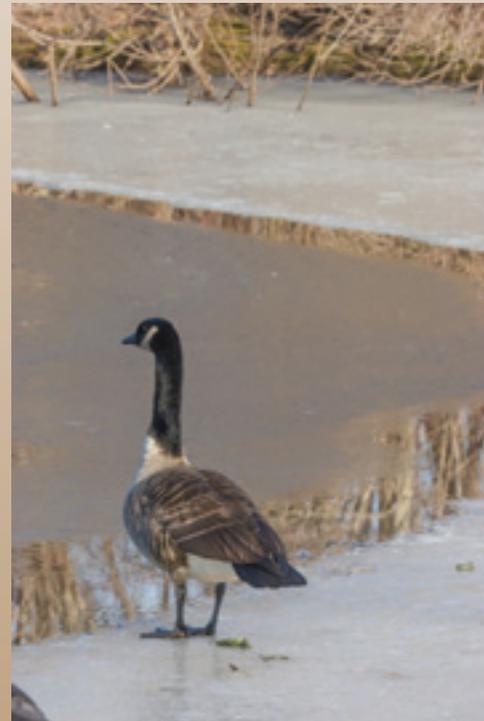
No matter if the morning cold is bitter, stop at No Name culvert and wait quietly for as long as you can stand it. Shivering is worth the slim chance of spotting a Virginia rail lurking in the brush or hurrying across the shallow ditch. It will be even more fortunate to find it in the open for a photograph. Look behind





you, and search under the reeds, too. And be still if you wish to be rewarded. Should the ditch be frozen, as sometimes happens in a strong cold snap, just continue on the path and wait for a thaw.

The now-frozen lake creates some hardship for the remaining wildlife. Gulls can no longer fish (even if they could rouse themselves to consider it), and the last mallards and Canada geese seem confused. Waterfowl and gulls gather in the shrinking pools, or enjoy the water during intermittent thaws early in the season.



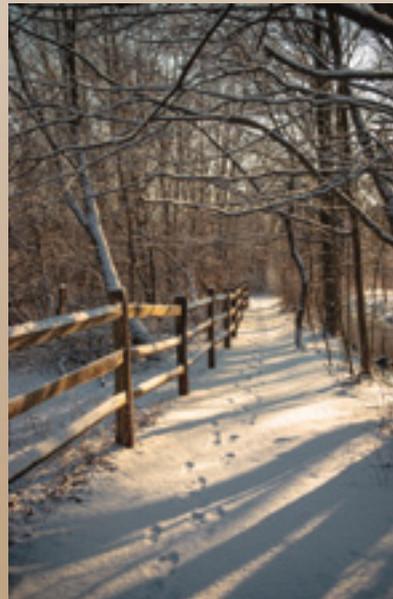
In all but the coldest winters small patches of open water may appear on occasion in the Big Ditch at the northern end. Mallards trying to overwinter may find some swimming space there. It is a caution to skaters: there are springs nearby and the ice can be thin. Now the cold settles in more strongly and the entire pond may be frozen solid.





Some winter guests could surprise you. A great blue heron may decide to brave the season; if he is lucky he might survive on dormant bullfrogs which thought the mud of the brook to be a safe winter refuge.

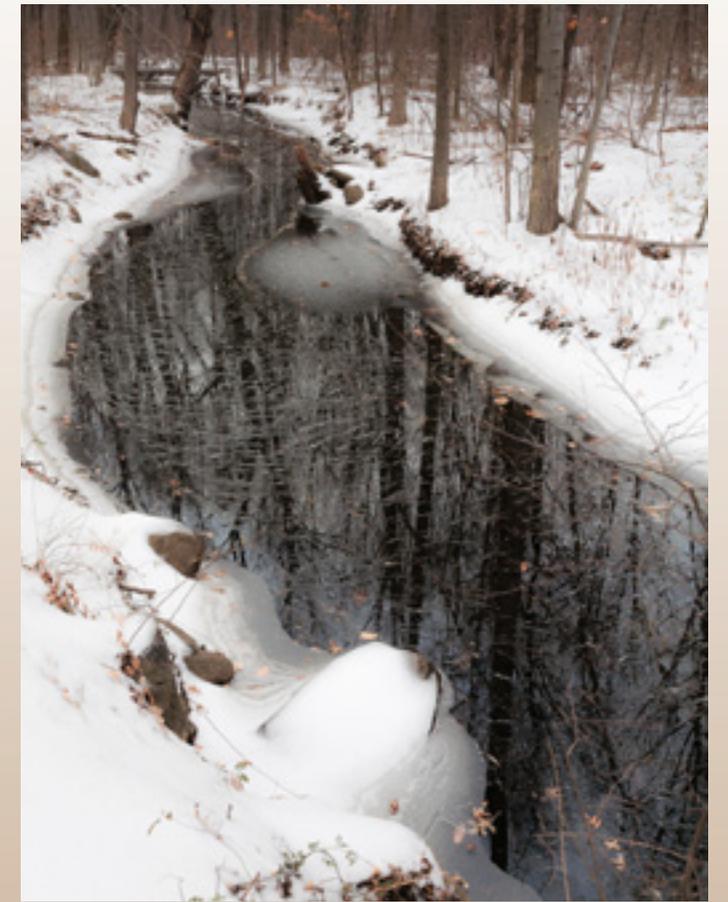
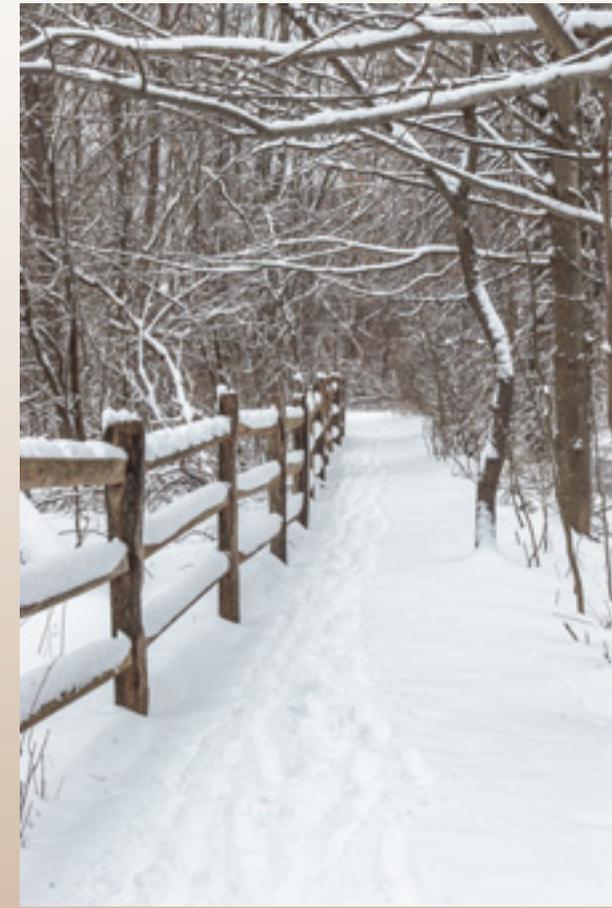
Snow will come when it will come in New Jersey, but when it finally arrivea the Preserve will be beautiful. Many others think so, too. No matter how early you arrive, someone else's footprints will lead away ahead



of you. Water may still flow over the weir and the brook behind you will stand out starkly from the snow-covered banks. Early morning light after a snowfall gives some photo opportunites, even in the frigid cold.



A cardinal could call attention to itself against the white, or with the sky as a backdrop. All will be still. Everything will seem different.

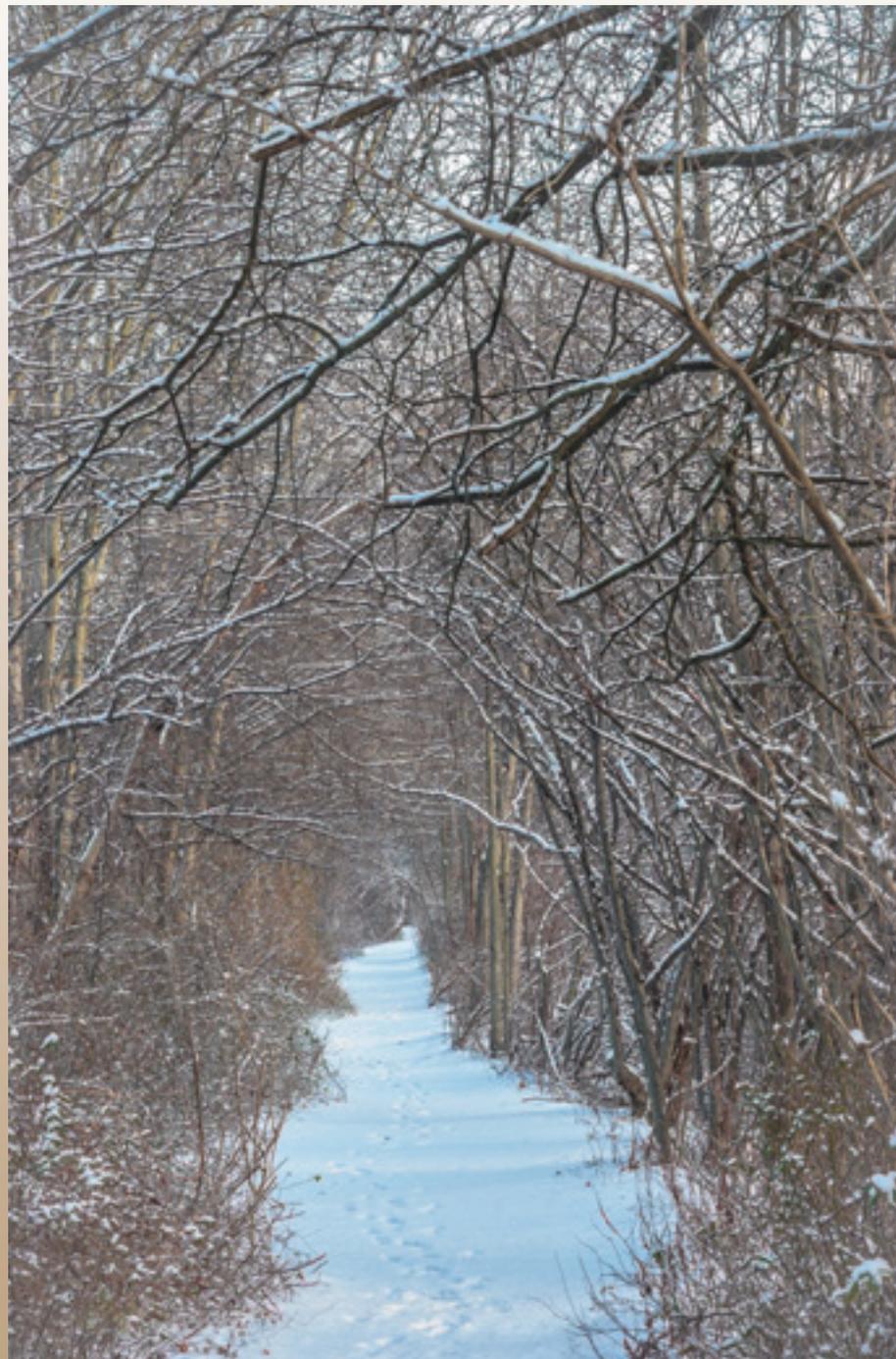


Farther along, the brook looks black, stark against the white banks, and it is quiet. On a cold day you feel alone in the whole Preserve. On weekdays that's possible more often than not, and when no one is in sight you will believe it.

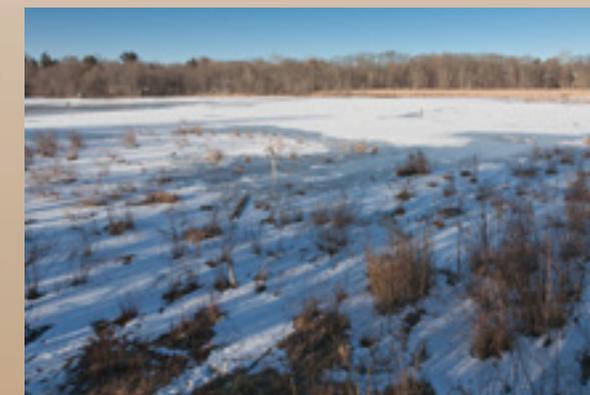


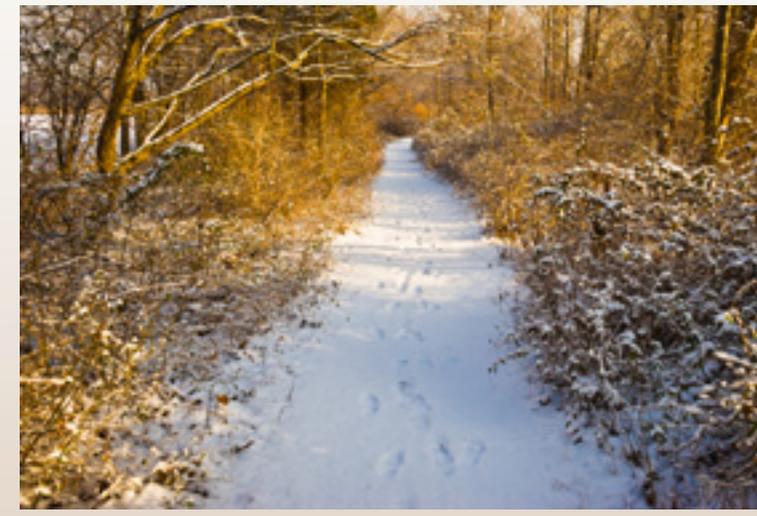


Deer tracks are more easily seen and evidence of the last geese to leave is left on the snow-covered pond. The path north along the brook may be decked out in snow-covered branches and snow may fall into your collar if a breeze comes up. The ice will be blanketed, wiping out the skaters' tracks on the pond and foiling the next hockey game. Some visitors have been fortunate enough to see foxes emerging from the reeds to hunt or play early in the morning.



If the big freeze has come late the Preserve may already be covered in light snow before the lake ices over. Skaters will arrive to test for safety, hoping to play before the next snowfall. Some are thoughtless visitors and too often leave trash for volunteers to collect in spring. Early snows sometimes disappear in warm spells, bringing back the drabness for a time. And with snow on the ground the views along the shoreline can seem even more desolate. It may not be possible to separate the pond from frozen ground. It is a sheet of white.





A brief snowfall that dusts the reeds for a time gives a lightness to the place and relieves the dreariness. Elsewhere in the preserve the snow does little to cheer us. eavier snows may press large swathes of phrags to the ground; suddenly there are open spaces to view. Grasses and cattails have thinned out.

Snow is no friend to mink, squirrels and muskrats. Coloration is now a liability and food becomes more difficult to find. We can only guess how many will not survive the winter. Sparrows search out seeds blown onto the snow and work hard for a meal. Stalks and stems poke through the snow and may provide some food. Not all will fail to find some, and we hope it lasts until spring.

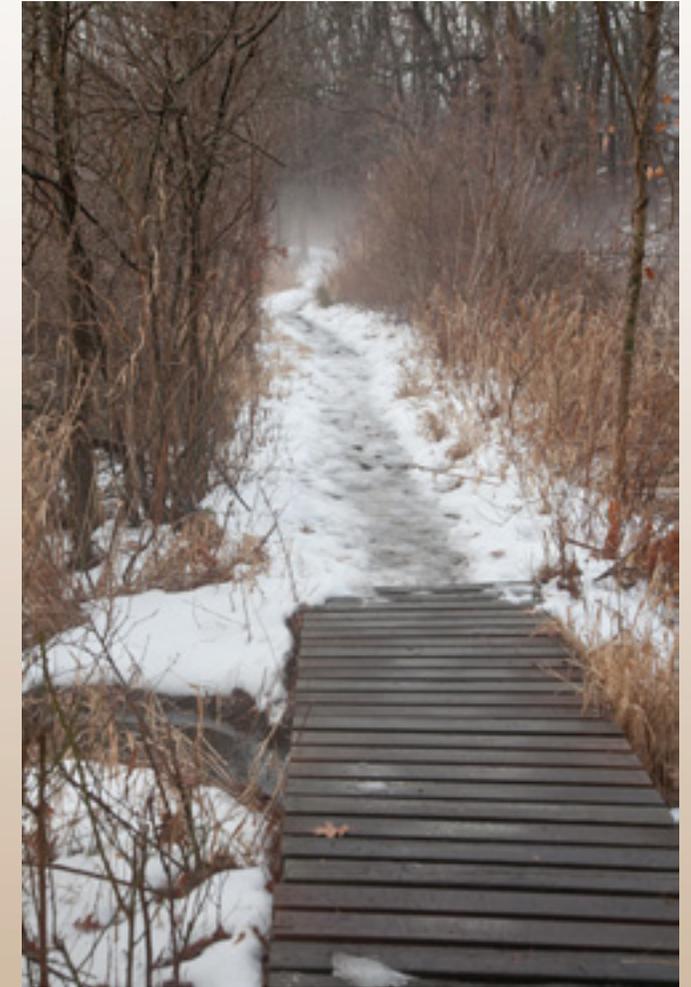


Constant freezing and thawing gouges the paths. You must tread carefully as packed snow becomes ice and the trail becomes treacherous. It will be wise to acquire traction aids for your boots; even so, you will slip occasionally. You will find yourself alone more and more during each visit, although there may be skaters at the Warden's Watch if the wind hasn't caused the forming ice to roughen and if they want to shovel and clear a patch. Under the weight of snow the Preserve seems more stark. On occasional warmer mornings, especially closer to spring, a mist may form above the snow and ice. If you have taken a poor photograph it just means you have been careless.

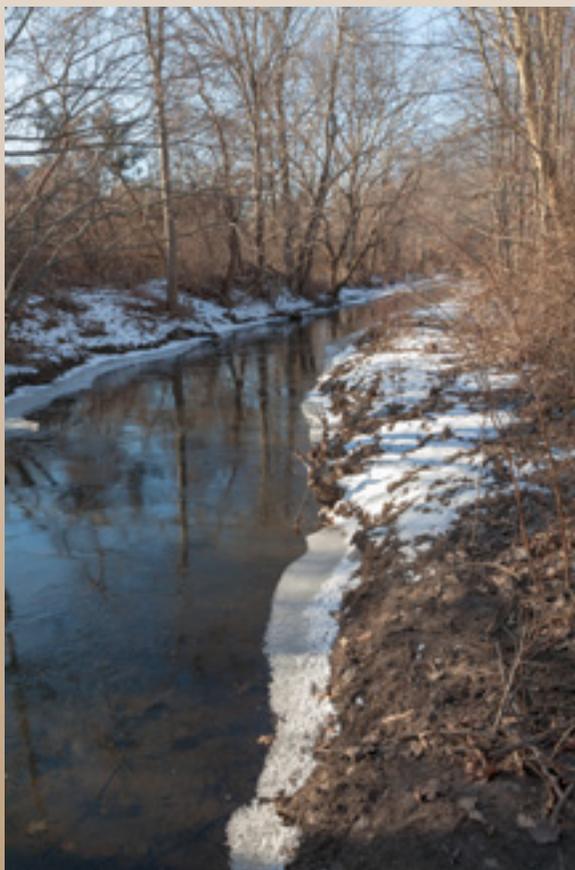
Birding has not been completely hopeless, though. Cardinals overwinter, with the occasional titmouse and of course the chickadees. Gulls, not always common in summer, can often be seen on the ice. And there is always the possibility of finding wrens and nuthatches and red-tails, along with the sparrows.

By late January, in most years, it has been cold enough to build the ice thickness. It now allows walking far onto the pond to see at least some of what has been hidden from you from the shore. There are springs below the ice, though, and thin spots. It is best not to go alone.

Thaws now become more frequent, and sometime in February the paths can already be slippery with mud. The Farm is winter-ugly and brown and it takes some mental effort to visit. The paths, part



snow, part ice, part water, part mud, are difficult to navigate. As the ice vanishes the mud truly defines the Preserve. Wood chips spread on the trail the previous year now become part of the goo. Boots are harder to clean, and the mud tries to suck them from your feet. Nightly freezes generate ankle-twisting ruts in the morning, and a cold snap can freeze them in place for days. A late snow, freeze, then thaw may extend this miserable season. The warmer days and longer daylight do help morale, though, while waiting for the birds to return—even as the mud makes the place less inviting.



Early morning mists now occur more frequently as temperatures moderate. Thick glazing on the paths turns to slush and nightly freezing recovers less and less of the ice. The remaining snow retreats. Tuffets along the shore still sit in white patches, but there is now optimism that winter is nearing the end of its hold on the place. The threat of snow still remains throughout March and the Preserve often appears wintry when the first spring season residents begin to return. Whatever the snowfall, cover will not remain long, and the landscape can turn from white to brown in a day or two.

There is no predicting what will arrive first, but our heron is already here—he has made it through the winter and looking none the worse for it during the cold; in fact, he has



been accessible to birders for just about the entire season.

The red-winged blackbirds are some of the earliest visitors, often in February, putting up with snow and ice and calling from perches in trees and phrags.



There are heavy buds on the trees by now, although leafing out is weeks away. The red-tails are as active as ever.

Mute swans may also be among the earliest arrivals; a breeding pair could already have landed in the snow, waiting for clearings in the ice. They are sometimes too early, going to sleep in clear water only to find themselves icebound in the morning.



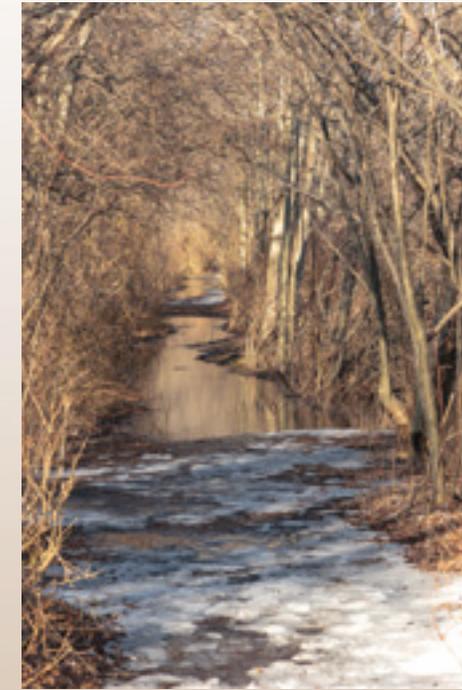
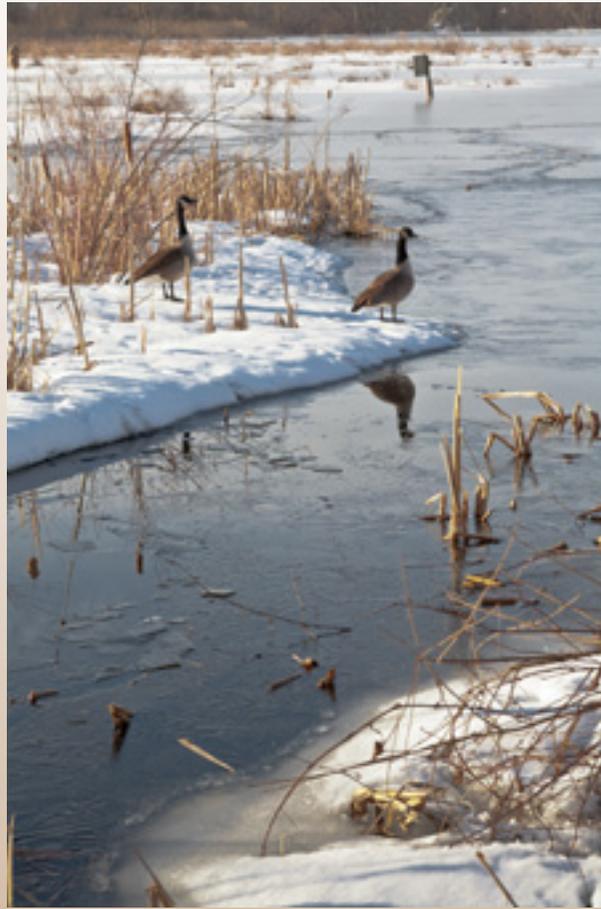
When new ice forms now it is thin, and geese and mallards may be able to make some headway against it.

The goose population increases beyond the few winter residents. Bachelor swans may drop in to rest, but will not stay long if the breeding pair is about. The resident swans patiently wait for the ice to clear, and begin the search for a nesting site.



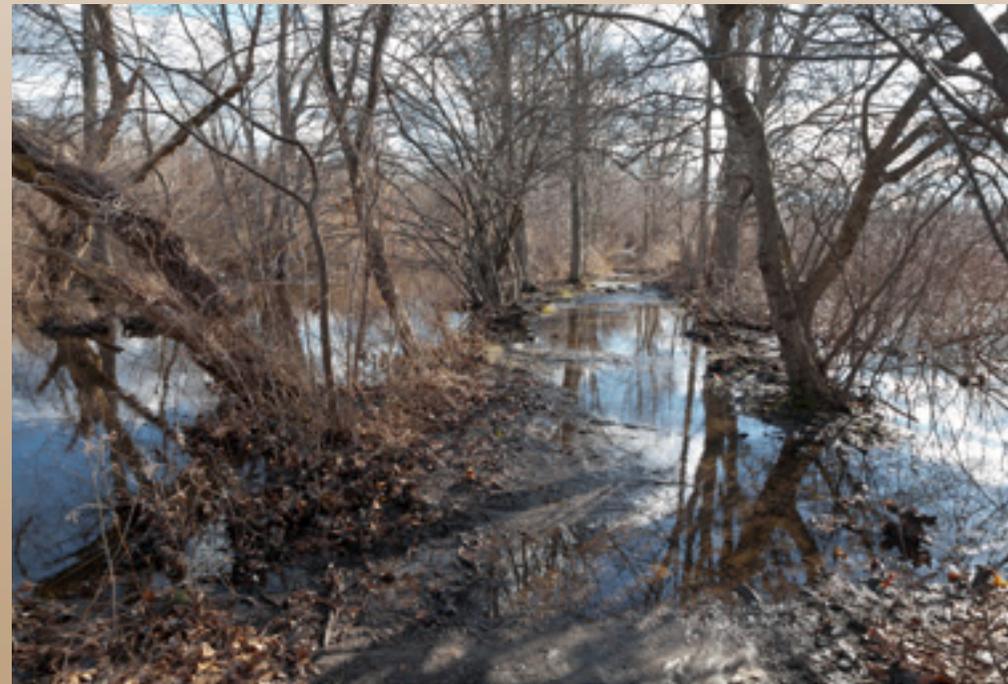
We find more ice-free days as March advances, although the ice is slow to leave where full sun can not yet reach. Rain is now much more probable than snow, and the Preserve is likely showing its old, drab self. Paths have become true mud hazards.

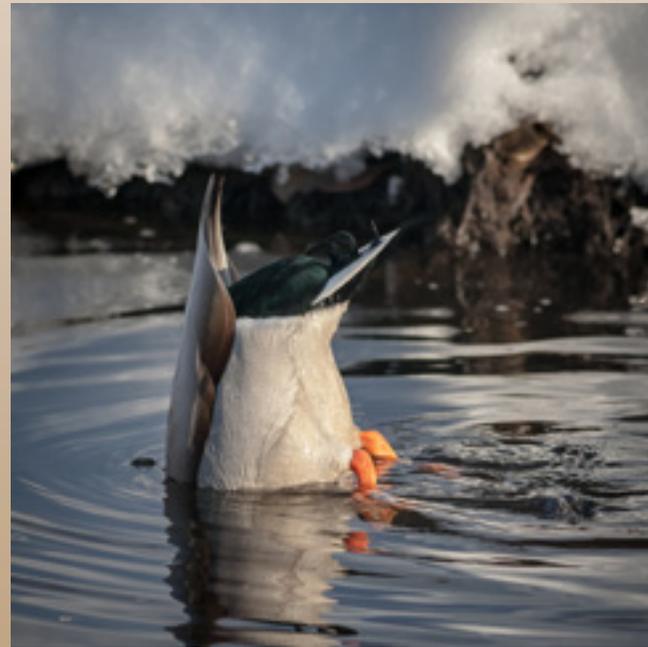




parking area. It is worse when the rains come hard before the ground has thawed. But even after the rain and a thaw, a late snow may still fall in the Preserve, extending the time we must deal with ice and mud.

When rains are heavy or frequent the trails can be difficult to navigate, even on the verges. Late winter downpours can produce large amounts of runoff into the Celery Farm that swell the pond. The brook may extend its reach to the pond and flood the paths, even close to the

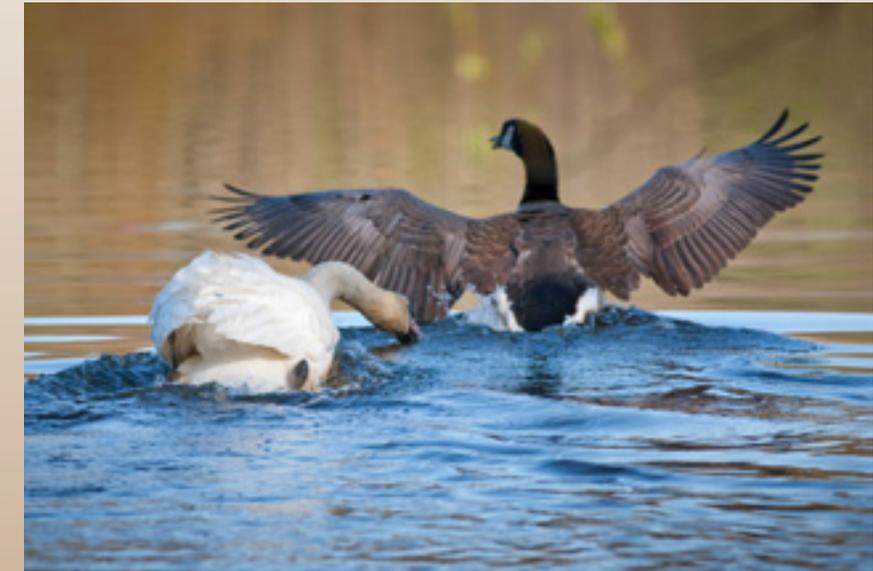




Old friends have been returning one by one. More and more mallards arrive, often having to make do without clear water for days on end if they are too early. We will find them in the brook and on the shore asleep, or pretending to be.

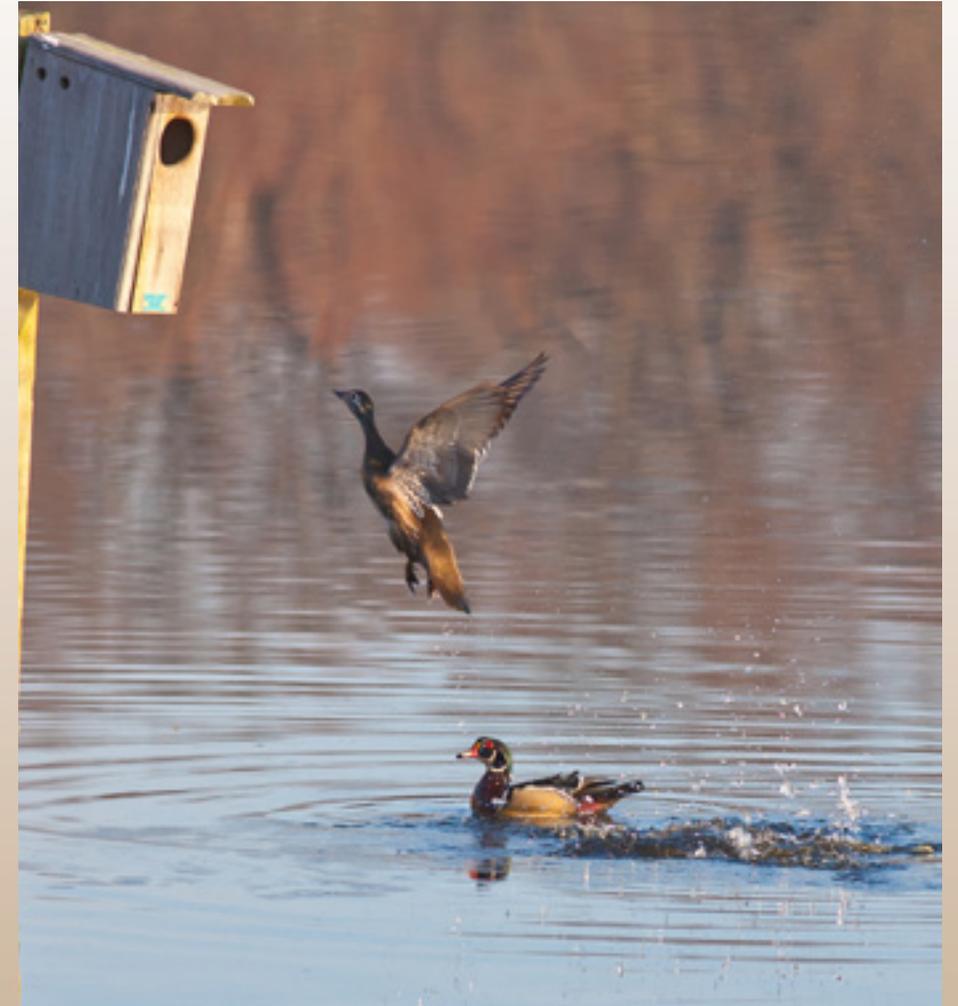
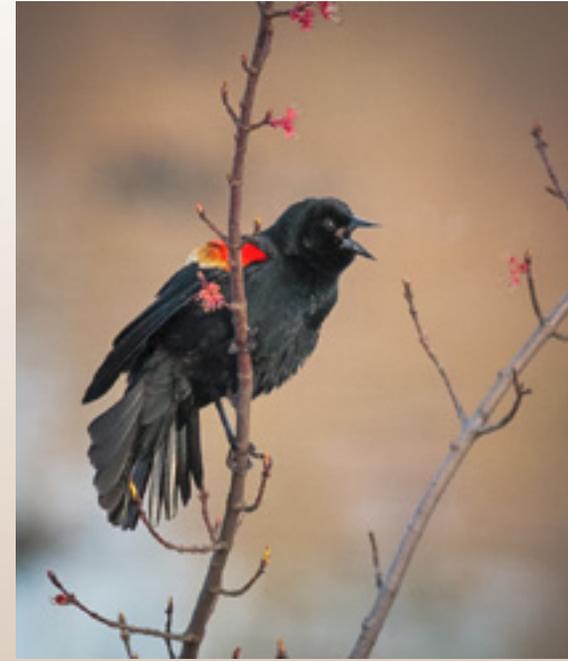


Canada geese return in force as the water clears of ice, squabbling and honking at each other. It is time to survey nesting places, and to assert sovereignty over them. The confrontations are constant; the arrival of a swan in the neighborhood may settle the issue of the moment,



Transient visitors, perhaps ruddy ducks, may stop in, or hooded mergansers may spend some time at Phair's Pond after the final thaw. You will find grackles, some already in breeding plumage, at almost any time in March.





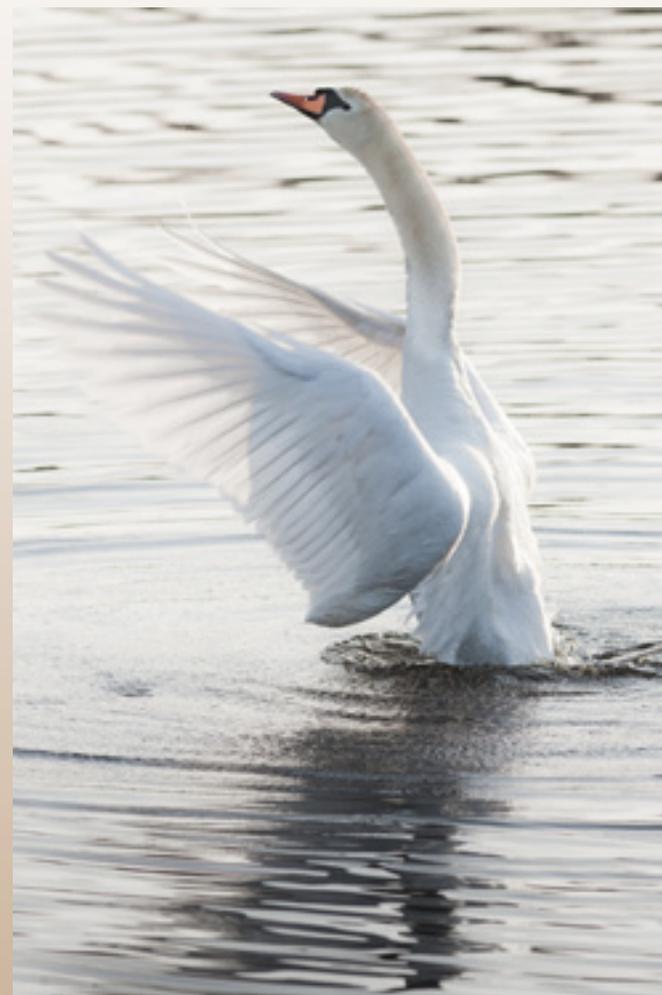
With few opportunities for bathing during the winter, the geese can now enjoy a good soaking. When the pond re-freezes on colder nights they must wait patiently for warmer days. It is a pleasure to watch them in lines as they land, before we remember how happy we were to see them depart last year.



The red-wings have been staking out territory and the wood duck hens are claiming nesting boxes, but taking their time choosing. It may be weeks before a suitable apartment is selected, even if the choice is only from one among five or so unless she elects to nest in a tree.



It is still just mid-March. Days or even weeks after arriving the swan has made her selection. We had hoped that she would nest within viewing distance, but that has only happened rarely. The pair will protect the nest aggressively so perhaps it is best that it is out of the way. A swan coming ashore is more than intimidating. The pair cooperates in the building but when the nest is finished the cob will begin his lonely rounds of the pond that will last for more than a month. He will return to visit the nest often.



Song sparrows are heard everywhere. The white-throats and juncos begin to drift away north. With snow nearly gone, squirrels and chipmunks become more active on the ground.

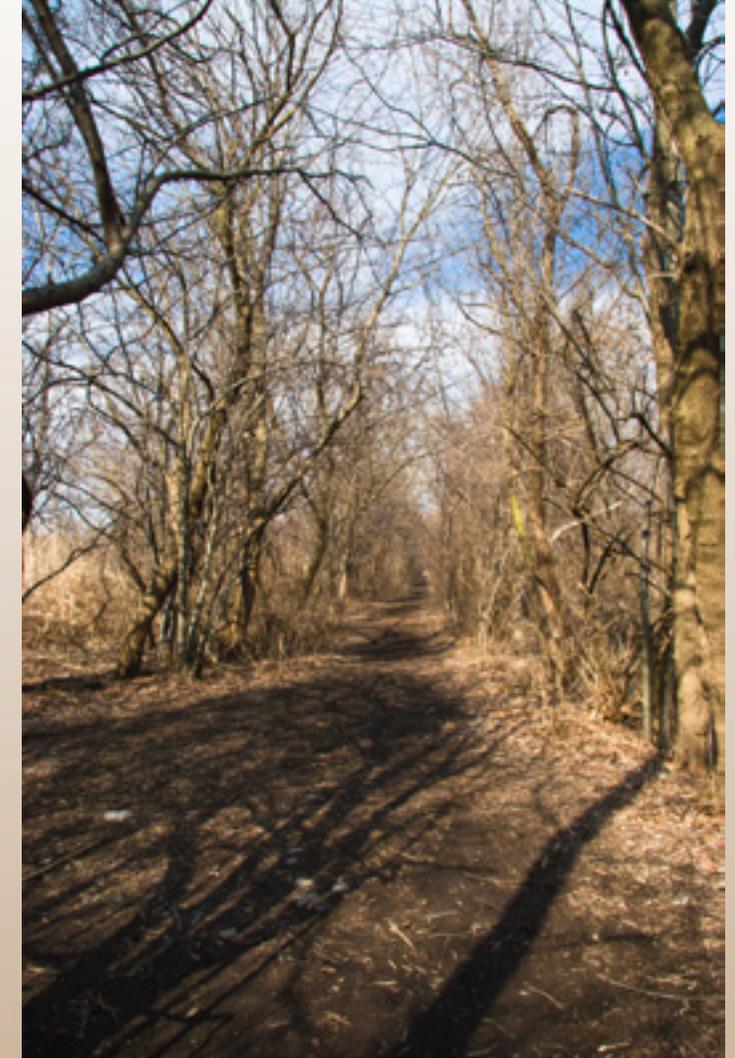
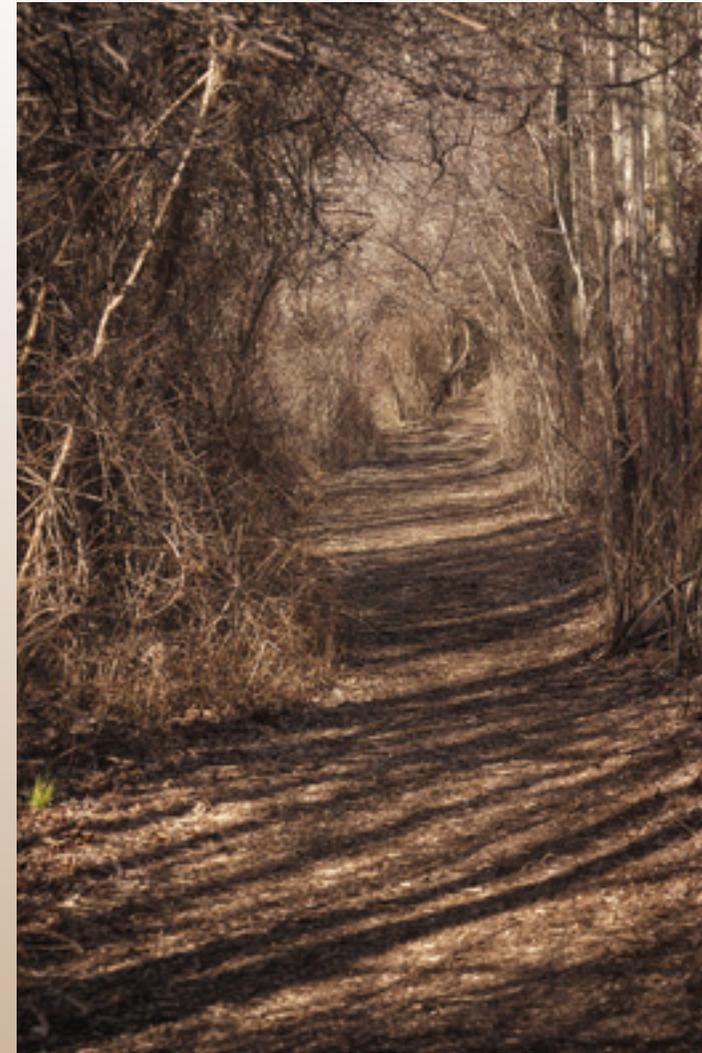


Although it is not quite spring yet—dreary and cold mornings are still likely when you visit—there is promise. On dry days, or when the mud is not too assertive and the sun is out, the Preserve seems truly ready for its annual renewal.

Some color begins to show, beginning in early March. Tufts of onion grass appear, and skunk cabbage shoots poke through the snow. Pussy willow erupts. Clumps of snowdrops, which may have been buried in the snow, now show up in several places. There are more hours of daylight, and the sun is higher in the sky.

The paths seem less bleak, even though new life is scarcely evident. It does not feel fully springlike, although it is not quite winter either as the seasons blend into each other, and the weather alternates between





warmth and cold. But the uplifting feeling that the winter is close to an end grows stronger with each visit as the cycle continues. We look forward to the new season. For photographs' sake, let's hope it takes its time this year, not rushing headlong into summer. We will see.

NOTES ON PHOTOGRAPHING AT THE CELERY FARM

The Celery Farm is far from a paradise for photographers. Those who have photographed wildlife in, say, Florida or Central America or just about anywhere else will be asking where everything went. I've asked the same thing myself, and often—particularly in recent years. Many local nature photographers shun the place for that reason. Some years are better; recent ones have been dreadful, and many experienced shooters that used to visit no longer come to photograph or socialize. A struggle for tripod space at the Warden's Watch has become more of a lonely vigil on weekend mornings. We all have our reasons for coming to photograph the Celery Farm or for ignoring it, but I will admit that if the Celery Farm were more than the two miles from my home it would have been difficult over the years to motivate myself to capture the images in this book.

Given the caveats above, you may decide against dragging your gear here. But if you come, do think hard about equipment. Distances here across

open water are pretty large, so for waterfowl, herons and egrets, and birds in flight really long lenses are often necessary (600 mm, if you've got one—and bring a tele-extender); no lens can seem long enough at times. Before you think of investing north of \$10,000 in that kind of gear, think about where else you might use it, and consider that even a 600 mm lens is often inadequate at the Celery Farm, and how frustrating it will be when nothing shows up. Tele-extenders can increase the reach to as much as 1200 mm, equivalent to a 24X spotting scope, but this places extraordinary demands on camera, tripod, and technique. You may have to lower your keeper standards if you go in that direction, and forego birds in flight.

For me, a big lens on an adequate tripod is a disadvantage here, since that burden will normally restrict one to the Warden's Watch or the Pirie Platform; other parts of the preserve are inconvenient to reach carrying such a load. If you're old enough to afford it you may be too old to haul it. It can be done, but experience shows that you will seldom find a long lens away from the first two platforms. Worse, there are few places along the shore accessible to photographers

where we might expect to find and shoot wildlife. There are no blinds along the paths. Getting close to an egret away from the Warden's Watch, for example, is rare.

If you don't have a monster lens and the best camera, should you not bother at all? There are still lots of opportunities for landscape shots in any season and a shorter telephoto like my relatively inexpensive 400 mm will get you many birds and close-in waterfowl. A shorter lens on an APS-C body may give equivalent magnification. With just about any digital single-lens reflex mounting a short lens, and a small expenditure for extension tubes and a flash, you can do macro work all over the Preserve. Crabapple blossoms, orchard spiders, webs, dragonflies or whatever else you can find can be magnified and photographed in great detail. Many point-and-shoot cameras can do remarkable close-focus work. You may also encounter a deer on the trail, or a row of freshly minted mallard ducklings nearly at your feet. Look for the beetles in the milkweed silk in fall and the hummingbird moths, or the jewelweed blossoms, or jumping spiders in holes at the Warden's Watch platform.

If you have a good spotting scope, consider adapting it to accept a point-and-shoot camera. Digi-scoping can produce very good results with little relative cost, remembering that you have spent a bundle already. Make sure your tripod is up to it, though; most I've seen supporting scopes are too light for photography with the magnifications involved. More money.

It goes without saying that early morning is best, both for light and for finding creatures, and I have often left home before sunrise to (I hope) capture pretty light or dramatic skies in landscapes or just watch the geese vacate the place. Try to catch the blackbird blastoff from the phrags early on mid-autumn mornings. When the joggers arrive the egrets and black-crowns will bolt and there is little chance of spotting a deer or muskrat, but warblers and catbirds don't care much. Late afternoon and evening can be lovely, but avoid Pirie because of the glare off the lake from direct sun and the potential long walk back in the dark if the sun sets, unless you have something specific in mind, of course. Spring, as you might expect, is the most productive season and summer

generally the least, largely because of the heavy foliage and uniform color. Winter in the Preserve, while often dreary, provides lovely grazing light and the chance to see foxes (I should be so lucky) and white-throated sparrows, and foggy landscapes as spring approaches, although without the variety that spring affords. The trail conditions and the cold do discourage visitors. Did I mention I prefer solitude on the paths? Arrive as soon as you can after a snowfall to catch snow in the trees above the paths. Autumn colors, especially viewed from the Warden's Watch, can be spectacular in the morning. But the worst times (read: ugliest) are probably late fall/early winter, just before the pond begins to freeze and the most of the ducks have vanished along with the leaves. New Jersey lacks the evergreens and white birches that make New England winters at least visually tolerable.

With apologies to experienced shooters, those new to photography might try these suggestions. If you can afford good equipment, great; bring it. But you can get good results with any camera. If you see an opportunity, assuming that it's not a skittish creature and you have the luxury of time to think, stop and ask yourself what appealed to you and how you

might make it more interesting either in-camera or at the computer. Move about, check different angles. Close one eye and re-examine your find; it very well might evaporate as an opportunity when you look at it that way. A blue filter can give a decent idea of how the scene will look in monochrome. Look carefully at the background and think about how you might avoid distractions, whether it should be in focus or blurred, and set the aperture accordingly. Check the viewfinder or LC screen carefully to see what you have cut off at the edges or inadvertently included, and control the tilt of the camera to suit your idea. Bracket exposures, especially in high contrast situations, to increase your keepers (or to blend at the computer). Keep the shutter speed up for flight shots, and learn to pan smoothly. Teach yourself how to handle strong backlighting with exposure compensation and practice with your pop-up flash for fill. This isn't film—exposures are practically free. You will drive your spouse or companions crazy, but you will get better photographs. Delete the rubbish, and backup your keepers.

Having said all that about patience, I do suggest some practice in getting off quick exposures as well because you will not always be able to reflect upon

a wildlife opportunity. But still be careful of an itchy trigger finger or you may miss focus. Understand how quickly your autofocus and image stabilization respond under different light, and let the camera settle for a fraction of a second before opening the shutter. Try back-button focus if your camera supports it, to separate metering and focusing operations from each other. Set anticipated focus distances manually as you walk so the camera will respond more quickly.

Of course, it helps greatly if you understand what your camera settings actually do and how they will affect depth of field, digital noise, autofocus, exposure, and camera shake. A camera won't drive itself. Learn how metering modes work. Invest some time getting familiar with image enhancement software like Adobe Lightroom, Photoshop, or PS Elements. Pick up a bit at a time, as you need it. Look at good work and think about how you might duplicate the efforts that appeal to you. The difference between a decent image and a very good one is frequently small, and often in the details. Read about photography—not just in your camera manual (which is not a bad idea, either), but to learn what makes a good photograph and how to improve your technique. Don't let the

camera make your aesthetic decisions; avoid JPEGs and shoot in RAW mode when you acquire the software to handle that, then “develop” your images yourself and don't just settle for what your camera decides are good exposures and colors. Good photography requires commitment, learning, and practice.

If all this seems like a lot to manage, it is. But it isn't necessary to learn it all at once. Modern cameras are not completely stupid, and if you start in Program or Auto mode you can concentrate on aesthetics and will get decent results quickly. If you take lots of photos you will learn from your mistakes. You will soon realize that those results are getting better, and will be able to decide if the rate of improvement is worth the effort. At the very least, the work will translate into far better family photos.

Lastly, satisfy yourself. It's nice if others appreciate your work, but if you are satisfied there need be no other incentive to photograph. Most of us will always be minor leaguers compared to the best nature photographers like Art Wolfe or Frans Lanting, but it is not our livelihood, just what makes us happy.

NOTES ON THE PHOTOGRAPHS

Most of the photographs are meant to convey the spirit of the place, not planned as exhibition images, but some have been exhibited as prints. The images presented here were processed using Adobe Photoshop in various versions up to CS6, and in Adobe Lightroom, but only with minimum of adjustment for cropping, color control, sharpening, etc. But none has had any feature (or creature!) added or removed, nothing was done in processing the raw files that would not have been attempted in traditional dark-room work, and all were taken at the Celery Farm. This is not a natural history book, but a photographic essay, so I felt justified in enhancing many of the images (minimally) to make them better photographs.

I generally carry two camera bodies at the Celery Farm to avoid lens changes to minimize missed opportunities (I hope). These photographs were taken with Canon digital single-lens reflex camera bodies (20D, 5D, 5D Mark III or 1Ds Mark II over the years) with a few lenses at a time from the list of Canon 400mm f/5.6L, 70-300mm f/3.5-f/5.6 DO,

24-105mm f/4L, 17-40mm f/4L, or a 70-200mm f/2.8L

IS Mark II with or without a 2× extender, and on a few occasions with a borrowed 100-400mm zoom or a 400mm f/4 DO. Insect and other close-up images (none in this volume) were taken largely with a Canon 100mm f/2.8L macro lens or the 400/5.6L, the latter with extension tubes and in every case with diffused (important!) flash. In dim conditions or to give a catchlight in the eye, there is often a need for fill flash. I use a flash extender with a Fresnel lens at longer distances—a Better Beamer on a Canon 550EX flash in high-speed synch mode, which is dialed back when appropriate to minimize red-eye or steel-eye and to avoid blowing highlights. I may drag a tripod for very early morning circuits; it helps image quality at any time of day, but I do it grudgingly. Working with a small equipment load encourages me to make frequent visits, the only way to get enough material for a book such as this at the Celery Farm.

To sum up the way I've worked: minimal kit, frequent visits, early morning arrival, and an all-year schedule.