

# The Croydon Chronicle

NEWSLETTER

WINTER 2012

## In This Issue:

- ❑ Ice Crystal Lantern
- ❑ Owls
- ❑ Winter Constellation
- ❑ Spring Festival, Native Plant Sale, 10th Anniversary Celebration

## Croydon Creek Nature Center

852 Avery Road  
(off Baltimore Road)  
Rockville, MD 20851  
240-314-8770  
[www.rockvillemd.gov/croydoncreek](http://www.rockvillemd.gov/croydoncreek)



## Letter from the Supervisor

While spring and fall are tied for my most favorite seasons, I admit that I look forward to that first light dusting of snow each winter. It's the perfect backdrop for Northern Cardinals to display their glorious colors and it makes searching for animal tracks a breeze. Note that I wrote "dusting" and not blizzard. Like most things in life snow is good in moderation.

Unfortunately, there is no way to predict what kind of winter will greet us this year. Folklore provides us with two methods to predict winter weather. The woolly bear caterpillar, the larval form of the Isabella tiger moth, is said to be an indication of the severity of the cold season. These bristly looking caterpillars have distinct black and reddish-brown stripes. Some say that the wider the brown stripe, the more mild the winter. The plant kingdom has its own indicator in the holly shrub. Some say that bright berries indicate a harsh winter is on its way.

Clearly both methods have little basis in science but are good reminders to take some time and observe the world around us. Winter is a great time to get outdoors even if it is only for a few minutes each day. Being outdoors can combat the winter blues and if you add a short hike, you're guaranteed to feel better afterwards. With that in mind we have a smattering of programs to help you and your family get into nature this season.

Our Winter Family Hike on Saturday, Jan. 21, is a great way to enjoy the quiet of the forest while learning about the changes in the landscape and animal behavior that occurs this time of year. If you find the stars more interesting, join us for our Star Party to observe the stars of the winter sky.

If you are interested in a citizen science project, come to our Great Backyard Bird Count on Saturday, Feb. 18. Participants will learn how to identify common backyard birds and help the Cornell Lab of Ornithology with their ongoing research.

Late winter is a great time to think spring too! Our Go Green Lecture: Spring Gardening Advice on Wednesday, Feb. 22, is a great opportunity to begin planning your plantings. Brett McNish, Smithsonian Gardens Supervisory Horticulturist, will offer tips for spring garden preparation. Bring your horticultural questions.

There are many more programs listed in this newsletter. At Croydon Creek Nature Center we aim to offer something for everyone. On behalf of the staff and volunteers, we hope to see you soon!

Warm regards,

Elissa Totin  
Nature Center Supervisor



City of  
**Rockville**  
Get Into It

# Ice-Crystal Lantern

## Materials:

- water
- large metal mixing bowl
- plastic yogurt cup
- cup of small stones or pennies
- freezing temperatures (outdoors or home freezer)
- votive candle
- pine branches (optional)

## Instructions:



- 1) Pour a couple of inches of water into the mixing bowl. Place outdoors (or in freezer) to freeze.

*Optional* – Submerge pine branches in the water for added color.



- 2) Once it is frozen, fill the yogurt cup with stones or pennies and center it on the ice in the bowl.

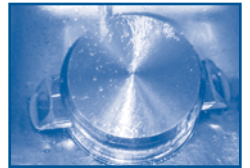
- 3) Slowly pour more water into the bowl until it is just below the rim of the yogurt cup. Let it freeze again.

- 4) To remove the lantern from the mold, run warm water on the outside of the bowl until the ice slips out.



- 5) Dump the stones or pennies out of the yogurt cup. Pour warm water into the cup to loosen it from the ice, and pull it out.

- 6) Place a votive candle in the well left by the cup.



# Winter Constellation – Orion, the Hunter

Winter is a great time of year to look up at the sky and see stars. The cold nights make the air crisp and clear, and if you look up you can see the stars and moon glittering above you.

One of the easiest constellations to find in the winter sky is Orion, the hunter, a character in Greek Mythology. To find Orion, look to the southeast and find three stars lined up in a row. These are the stars of Orion's belt and they are easily seen through the streetlights of the city.

If you look below and to the right of the belt you will see a bright white star name Rigel that forms Orion's knee. Above and to the left of the belt, at Orion's shoulder, you will see a bright orange star named Betelgeuse.



In the sky, Orion is accompanied by his two hunting dogs, Canis Major and Canis Minor. Canis Major contains Sirius, the Dog Star which is the brightest star in the winter sky. To find Sirius follow the line of Orion's belt to the left to the brightest star that you see. Sirius is the head of the dog depicted in the constellation Canis Major, the great dog.

To learn more about the night sky, join us for the Star Party on March 10! Spaces are limited so register early. See the Programs page for more details.

### Sky Viewing Tip:

Use a pair of binoculars to get a great up-close look at the moon and its craters!

# Programs

WINTER 2012

All programs take place at Croydon Creek Nature Center

## SCOUT BADGE DAYS

Naturalists will help you complete the necessary requirements to achieve the badges listed below. All materials provided; however, badges are not supplied by the Nature Center. Programs held rain or shine; dress for the weather. For additional information or to register, call Melinda Norton at 240-314-8771.

Times: 10 a.m.–noon or 2-4 p.m.

Cost: \$14 residents; \$16 non-residents

### Webelos Naturalist Badge

Sat., Feb. 4

### Webelos Geologist Badge

Sat., March 3

## Croydon Creek Campfire

Gather around the campfire at Croydon Creek Nature Center with your friends for stories, snacks and more. An adult must accompany children and all participants must register. Bring a blanket or lawn chairs for seating.

## Signs of Spring Night Hike

Enjoy a hike into the forest at dusk to look and listen for signs of spring. After the hike, we'll gather around the campfire to enjoy a campfire treat.

All Ages

37823 Sa 3/24 7:30-8:30 PM \$4/\$5

## Family Geocaching and Tree ID

Connect your family with nature in this program that combines winter tree identification and geocaching. All participants must register.

All Ages

37918 Su 3/4 1:30-3 PM \$6/\$8

## Fingerprint Valentine Cards

Learn how to make art with your fingerprints and put this skill to use making some Valentine cards for the people you love. Each participant will take home three Valentines. Children under the age of 8 must be accompanied by an adult.

All Ages

37881 Sa 2/11 10-11 AM \$5/\$7

## Go Green Lecture Series

Co-sponsored by the Nature Center and the City's Environmental Management Division, this lecture series offers easy ways you can make a positive impact on your environment. Advance registration required.

### Spring Gardening Advice

Brett McNish, Smithsonian Gardens horticulturist, offers tips for your spring garden preparation from proper pruning techniques to determining the right equipment for the job. Bring your gardening questions.

Age: 16+

37825 W 2/22 7-8 PM Free

## Great Backyard Bird Count

Participate in this annual event and help the Cornell Lab of Ornithology with their ongoing bird research. Learn how to identify common backyard birds and go on a hike to practice your skills. We'll count the birds we see and submit our results. Be a part of this important wildlife census.

All Ages

37821 Sa 2/18 9-10:30 AM \$2/\$3

## Hooray for Homeschoolers!

Croydon Creek Nature Center presents a series of programs offered specifically for our homeschooling friends. Each program consists of hands-on and minds-on activities that include both time in our classroom laboratory along with activities and hikes outdoors.

### Owls

Can owls turn their heads all the way around? Separate fact from fiction as you learn about the life history of owls, dissect an owl pellet and get up close and personal with our screech owl, Wink.

Age: 6-15

37827 F 2/10 1-2:30 PM \$6/\$8



### Nature Cafe

February is the month when many owls find their mates. Enjoy a cup of coffee while you are entertained with more fascinating bird stories.

All Ages  
37879 Tu 2/14 10-11 AM \$3/\$5

### Nature Tots

Spend time with your child discovering the wonders of nature. A naturalist will help you explore a new nature topic through nature play, crafts, stories and hikes. Dress for the weather. Adult participation required.

Age: 2-5  
**Groundhog Day**  
37813 Th 1/26 10-11:30 AM \$6/\$7

**Winter Birds**  
37814 Th 2/9 10-11:30 AM \$6/\$7

**Nature Detectives**  
37815 Th 2/23 10-11:30 AM \$6/\$7

**Fur and Feathers**  
37816 Th 3/8 10-11:30 AM \$6/\$7

**Amphibians**  
37817 Th 3/22 10-11:30 AM \$6/\$7

### Saturday Story and Craft

Stop by the Nature Center on Saturday mornings for story time and a craft. A naturalist will read a story and then lead a craft activity based on the theme of the story. All children must be accompanied by an adult.

Age: 2-5  
37819 Sa 1/28 10-11 AM \$3/\$5  
37820 Sa 2/25 10-11 AM \$3/\$5

### Star Party

Join us to learn about the stars in the winter sky. Learn about objects easily visible in the night sky, look through telescopes with an astronomer and enjoy a campfire treat. All participants must register.

Age: 6+  
37824 Sa 3/10 7-8 PM \$5/\$6

### Welcome Back, Birds!

Join us to welcome the birds back from their winter homes. Learn about birds that are returning to the area, make a welcome back present for feathered friends in your yard and go on a hike to look for signs of spring. All participants must register.

All Ages  
37878 Sa 3/24 10-11 AM \$3/\$5

### Winter Family Hike

Winter is a fantastic time to look for signs of animal activity and enjoy the quiet of the forest. Join a naturalist on the trail to look for footprints, nests, animal browse and more! After our hike we will warm up with a cup of hot chocolate. All participants must register including adults.

All Ages  
37880 Sa 1/21 10-11 AM \$2/\$3



Throughout history owls appear in myths and folklores. In these stories they are portrayed as a symbol of many different things, from protection to bad omens and symbols of wisdom.

It is understandable that mystery and intrigue surround owls because most people only hear these nocturnal creatures, and few are lucky enough to catch a glimpse of one flying through the night. Eighteen species of owls are found in the United States but only eight of those species occur in Maryland.

Barred Owls, Barn Owls, Eastern Screech-Owls and Great-Horned Owls are commonly found throughout our state. Northern Saw-Whet Owls migrate through in late fall and a few occasionally breed in western Maryland in the summer. Short-Eared Owls and Long-Eared Owls historically nested in Maryland, but no breeding birds have been seen in a number of years. Snowy Owls occasionally migrate through and can be seen along Assateague Island.

Owls are a bird of prey, catching their food alive with their extremely strong claws called talons. They are carnivorous, and in our area they eat rodents, birds, bats and even may eat a skunk. Owls are active during the evening hours and sleep during the day. They have many adaptations that make them excellent nighttime hunters. To sneak up on their prey, owls have feathers that allow them to fly almost silently.

Their feathers are long and soft, which helps muffle the sound of flight, and the lead edge of their wing feathers is soft and frayed, allowing the air to slip through them silently. They have eyes that are large and fixed (they do not move in their eye sockets). Large eyes let more light in which allows for precise night vision.

Comparatively, if humans had eyes the same size as owls, our eyes would be as big as softballs. To make up for their fixed eyes, owls have developed

an extremely flexible neck that can turn 270 degrees (three-quarters of the way around) in one turn. In comparison, humans can turn their head approximately 180 degrees (to either shoulder or half way around).

To protect their large eyes, owls have three eyelids. The third eyelid, called the nictitating membrane, is clear and protects the eyes in flight. Flying through trees and branches at night can be dangerous for the eyes. Owls also have impeccable hearing. Their faces are shaped like a disc and that disc collects sound and funnels it toward the ears so even the faintest sound of rustling leaves can be heard easily by an owl.



*Wink is our eastern screech owl, who was injured by a car and can no longer hunt on his own. At night, be mindful of owls swooping in front of your car in search of their prey.*

Many owls have tufts of feathers on their head called ear tufts, but an owl's actual ears cannot be seen. The ears are simply holes in the owl's head, and they aren't symmetrical like humans. Often one ear is higher on the head than the other. This helps them triangulate sound and accurately predict the distance and direction of the sounds that they hear.

Winter is the time when owls are mating. In our area, listen for owls' mating calls in late January or early February. Often they don't build their own nest but they use abandoned nests of squirrels, crows and woodpeckers. The cover of pines and old growth forests is attractive to owls to help them camouflage from predators and also act as a shelter during the cold winter months.

Some types of owls, such as barred owls, also nest near rivers or streams in stands of old trees. They also prefer an area with plenty of ground cover because this is where most of their prey is found. If you have the right habitat in your neighborhood, it is likely that owls are already there, but if you are looking to attract owls you can install nesting boxes or platforms in trees to encourage them to nest near you.

The nature center just installed a screech owl nest box in the pines along Avery Road. The next time you are at Croydon Creek be sure to check it out!

# 10th Anniversary Celebration!



## Spring Festival and Native Plant Sale Saturday, April 28, 1-4 p.m.

Crafts, Games, Live Entertainment,  
Native Plant Sale

Watch for the Native Plant Sale order form  
at the end of March

Croydon Creek Nature Center  
[www.rockvillemd.gov/croydoncreek](http://www.rockvillemd.gov/croydoncreek)

### Croydon Creek Nature Center

852 Avery Road

Rockville, MD 20851

240-314-8770

[www.rockvillemd.gov/croydoncreek](http://www.rockvillemd.gov/croydoncreek)