

## Winter Walk 2

# Winter Wildlife

### What To Look For In Winter

You can sometimes walk through Somme Prairie Grove at midday, in bitter cold, without seeing a single animal. But they're there, most obviously in early morning and late afternoon, and their tracks tell a thousand stories if there's snow.

The commonest tracks are the divided hoof marks of the **white tailed deer**. In the winter, deer eat mostly living twigs and branches. They digest the living bark, as do beaver. You may see twigs and bark gnawed by deer, meadow voles and **cottontail rabbits**.

**Coyote** tracks are frequent. It's not easy to tell them from dog tracks. But most dogs essentially walk the trail alongside their master. Coyotes go cross country. Their scat does not look like dog poo. Coyote scat is mostly hair and bones. They often deposit it at a trail intersection – to make a statement of some sort.

Often the commonest tracks at Somme are those made by **American tree sparrows**. They're busy eating seeds, especially of Indian grass. Usually the tracks of their feet are accompanied by scattered golden seed hulls on the snow and by 'wing tracks' – fan-like imprints showing each primary feather as the birds flit from seedstalk to seedstalk.

The tracks of **white-footed** and **deer mice** are also common. They're in groups of four, as they hop. Sometimes the imprint of the long tail is present too. Typically they begin at the opening of one mouse-sized snow tunnel and disappear at the entrance to a second tunnel.

In the grassy areas, tunnels of the **meadow vole** are everywhere. Because they're beneath both grass and snow, you usually can't see

them. But after a snow melt, the tunnels sometimes are the last snow left, since the voles have packed and heated it a bit, and the tunnel walls are icier than the rest.

Birds are often present. The most regular winter birds are **red-tailed hawk, mourning dove, red-bellied woodpecker, downy woodpecker, American robin, goldfinch, and American tree sparrow**. If you you're lucky, or your eyes are very sharp, you may see species such as these (from recent Christmas Bird Counts and mid-winter monitoring reports): **great horned owl, hairy woodpecker, white-throated sparrow, yellow-rumped warbler, kestrel, Cooper's hawk, cardinal, song sparrow, eastern bluebird, hermit thrush, slate-colored junco**, and one alien species, the **European starling**.

### Messages From The Stark Winter Landscape

It's great to see the gradually increasing numbers of **American tree sparrows** that are making Somme their winter home. This poorly named species lives in sub-arctic shrublands in the summer and shrubby grasslands in the winter. Once one of the commonest winter species in the Chicago region, it has been declining here due to loss of grasslands.

On many days, the most abundant birds are the **American robins and European starlings**. Sadly, these are **not** indicators of **ecosystem health**. They're mostly eating the blue-black berries of European buckthorn – the biggest threat to the health of this preserve. Also unfortunately, the birds digest the dried fruit and then poop out the seeds to disperse this invasive tree totally everywhere. Robins were uncommon winter residents in the Chicago region before the onslaught of buckthorn, but they're now one of the commonest species on winter bird counts. Many people think robins are in the south for the winter, because they appear back on our lawns during spring migration time. But their appearance in our neighborhoods then merely reflects the fact that worms come back

near the surface then. As buckthorn clearing at Somme proceeds, we'll have fewer winter robins. That's actually a good thing for most wildlife. The robins will just go elsewhere in winter, while the breeding species that count on Somme Prairie Grove have no where else to go.

The **green wire cages** that protect various trees and shrubs stand out especially in winter. Without the cages, over-abundant deer would eat the previous year's growth off every bur oak, hazelnut, sumac and certain other species. As we protect at least some individuals of these species until they rise about the height where deer browse, we allow the ecosystem to restore itself for all species, the deer included. (See additional discussion under "[Winter Botany](#)."