

# Winter

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## the great exhale

As winter winds blast across brown or white fields and the temperature dips, the land seems to breathe out—cleansing itself of the remnants of last summer’s growth. We hear the chattering of dried leaves, feel the ground becoming firm beneath our feet and sense a new sharpness in the air. This is the time of the great exhale, a moment of rest and release. And despite the cold and the starkness of the season, we place hope in the promise of a new cycle of regeneration and rebirth that is yet to come.



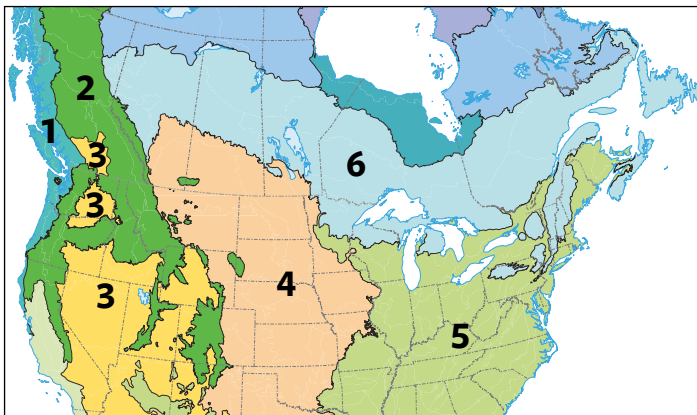
## Winter Nature Highlights by Region

### 1. Marine West Coast

- ↔ Bodies of freshwater and saltwater host thousands of waterfowl. In winter many of these birds form pair bonds and have interesting mating displays (e.g., bufflehead). Other common species include American wigeon, northern shoveler, red-breasted merganser, surf scoter, Barrow's and common goldeneye, brant, snow geese (estuaries), western grebe, horned grebe, common loon and red-throated loon.
- ↔ Large numbers of snow geese and, in some areas, trumpeter swans feed in corn fields.
- ↔ Anna's hummingbirds take advantage of non-native plantings and feeders to overwinter in much of the region.
- ↔ Thousands of dunlin and black-bellied plover remain to winter along the coast.
- ↔ Raptors, including peregrines, bald eagles, northern harriers and red-tailed

hawks, are most abundant at this time of year.

- ↔ You can see migrating gray whales along the Oregon coast in December. Some remain near the coast throughout the year. Bundle up and grab binoculars!
- ↔ Song sparrows, pacific wrens and red-winged blackbirds may begin singing in late winter.
- ↔ The Pacific treefrog (*Pseudacris regilla*) symphony begins in February. When Hollywood moviemakers wanted frog calls to convey the feeling of nighttime outdoors, they recorded treefrogs, so now their *ribbit* call is known to all.
- ↔ One of the first native shrubs to flower is Indian plum. Its creamy-white flowers provide a glimpse of spring at a time of short days, clouds and rain.
- ↔ In some areas, Oregon grape blooms as early as December in bright yellow clusters of flowers. Other early bloomers include red alder and western skunk cabbage.
- ↔ Mushrooms that can be found in winter include morels, cauliflower mushrooms (*Sparassis herbstii*) and hedgehog mushrooms (*Hydnum umbilicatum*).
- ↔ Weather is rainy and cold, even though temperatures rarely drop below freezing on the coastal lowlands.
- ↔ Howling winter gales make for great storm-watching. Tofino and Ucluelet on western Vancouver Island are popular destinations.



Ecological Zones of North America

## 2. Northwestern Forested Mountains

↔ A few species that can be seen in many areas in winter include mountain chickadee, Clark's nutcracker, Steller's jay, black-billed magpie, common raven, Townsend's solitaire and pine grosbeak.

↔ Winter is an excellent time to see mammals. For instance, if you visit Yellowstone National Park in winter, you should be able to see mule deer, pronghorns, bighorn sheep, elk, American bison, coyotes and gray wolves.

## 3. North American Deserts

↔ Bald eagles, northern harriers and rough-legged hawks overwinter in the region. Watch, too, for short-eared owls.

↔ In January and February, bald eagle numbers at Klamath Basin in Oregon and California peak at over 500 birds. There are also abundant wintering waterfowl.

↔ Lake Lowell (Deer Flat National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon) is the winter home to as many as 150,000 ducks and

geese and to the many raptors attracted by the large flocks of waterfowl.

↔ Elk often wander down to the grain fields to browse in the evenings and head back up to the safety of the forest at first light.

↔ Oregon spotted frogs, a species of special concern, start breeding in February or March at lower elevations.

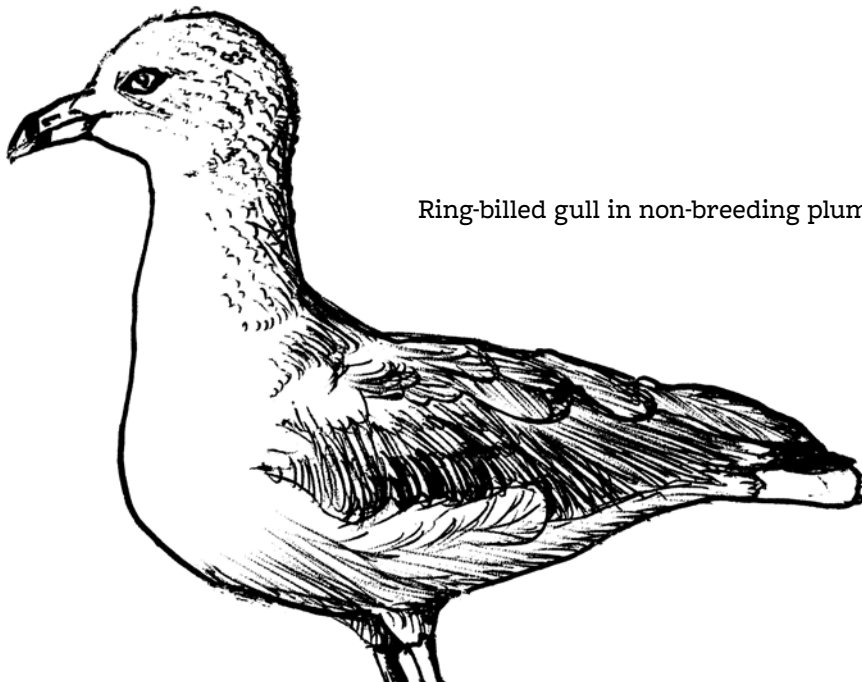
## 4. Great Plains

↔ Rough-legged hawks and golden eagles can be common in some locales. Small numbers of bald eagles will also winter in the area.

↔ Snowy owls are often seen.

↔ Other hardy birds like ring-necked pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse, gray partridge, great horned owls and snow buntings are active.

↔ Eastern red cedars, the only native evergreen on much of the Great Plains, become a vital source of shelter for many birds and mammals during severe winter weather.



Ring-billed gull in non-breeding plumage

### 5. Eastern Temperate Forests

↔ In late November and December, the Niagara River is one of the best places in the world to see a wide variety of gulls, including rarities like little gulls.

↔ In the Upper Mississippi River Valley, hundreds of wintering bald eagles congregate near open water and snatch fish with their talons. In the northeast, eagles spend the winter along the coasts of Maine, around Delaware Bay and on large, unfrozen lakes throughout the area.

↔ Amherst and Wolfe islands, west of Kingston on Lake Ontario, attract large

numbers of wintering hawks (e.g., rough-legged hawk) and at least five owl species, including snowy. Large rafts of diving ducks are also present in winter.

↔ Kemptville Creek at Oxford Mills, Ontario, is one of the best places to see mudpuppies in large numbers throughout the winter months. Organized mudpuppy-viewing outings take place.

↔ By late February, eastern skunk cabbage may begin poking through the snow. Evening rains may bring about a chorus of wood frogs and spring peepers in southern parts of the region as they prepare to lay eggs in vernal ponds.

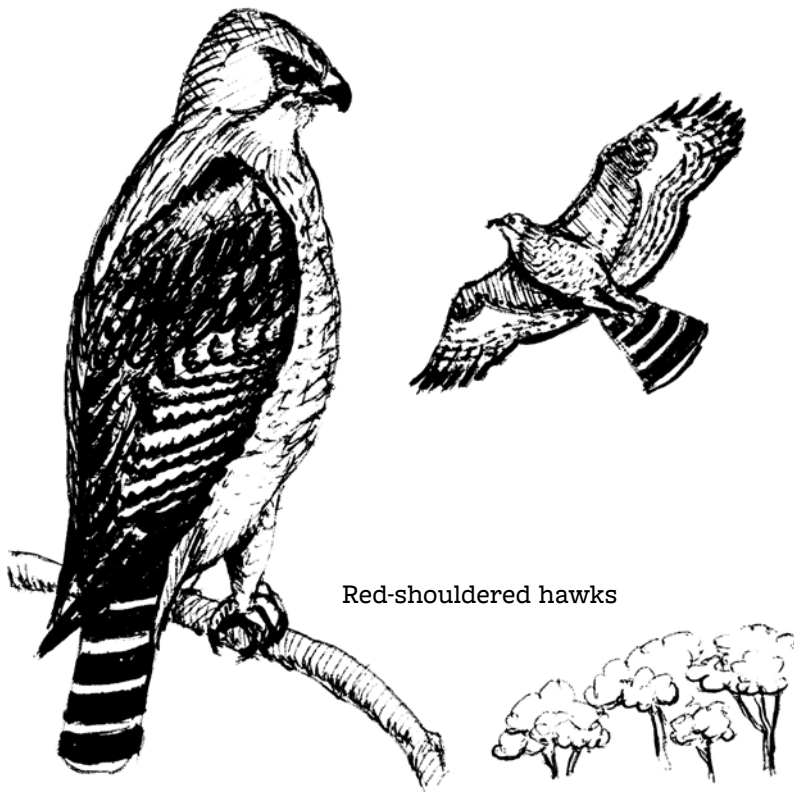
### 6. Northern Forests

↔ Some years, when conifers produce a lot of cones, large flocks of crossbills will show up and glean seeds from the cones. They are also fond of the salt and grit put down on roads in winter.

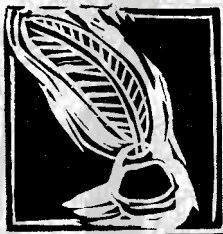
↔ Both great gray and northern hawk owls sometimes show up along the southern edge of the region (e.g., central Ontario) when rodent numbers crash in the north.

↔ Northern flying squirrels will sometimes soar down from trees to visit bird feeders at night. Floodlights outside don't seem to bother them, and they can be very tame and approachable.

↔ White-tailed deer travel to wintering areas, where they "yard up." These spots are often large stands of lowland conifers such as cedars or hemlocks, which provide food and shelter from the wind and snow.



Red-shouldered hawks



## *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*

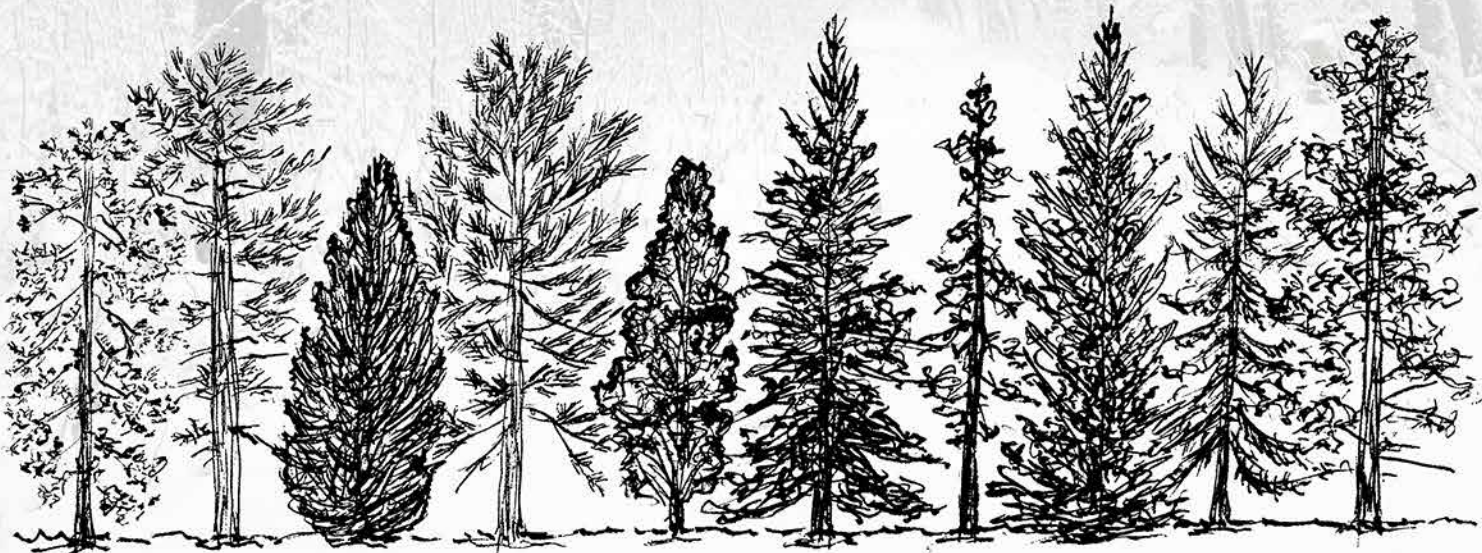
*Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.*

*My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.*

*He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.*

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.*

— ROBERT FROST



Silhouettes of different conifers