



Barred owls are opportunistic predators that will eat small mammals, rabbits, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish, and invertebrates. At this time of year, it was probably feeding on mammals and birds. Your photo of the pine marten (American marten) is great. Not many people get to see this secretive mammal (for more information, see Meet the Marten in the December 2007 Conservationist). Thanks for sharing.

—Scott Stoner, DEC Research Scientist

Blue Snow?

While on a walk last winter, I noticed a patch of blue snow where I had seen a bunny urinate the day before. Can rabbit urine turn blue?

Ed Miller
Albany County



Jef Taylor

We checked, and reportedly bunny urine can indeed turn blue if the rabbit has eaten a buckthorn plant. It appears that the ingested buckthorn chemical passes with the urine—a yellow or brownish color—and then turns blue in the presence of sunlight. A non-native plant, buckthorn is not a desired browse plant of native North American herbivores, and makes up only a small percentage of a cottontail's diet.

—Eileen Stegemann, Assistant Editor



Wild Encounters

I thought your readers would enjoy these photos. The owl took up temporary residence on one of my bird feeders. Night after night he showed up just after dusk and remained through the night. Once he spent the entire day there as well. I think he was dining on mice, voles and red squirrels that live in the snow beneath the feeder. Can you tell me what kind of owl this is, and is this typical behavior?

I snapped the photo of the pine marten on the trail to Algonquin Mt. where hikers often leave their packs while climbing Wright Peak. I think this little guy makes himself a good living from the largess, offered by or pilfered from, these hikers.

Jack Denero
West Monroe, Oswego County

Your visitor is a barred owl, and although these owls are found across New York, seeing one on your feeder is certainly unusual.

One-footed Blue Jay

We found this blue jay with its foot frozen to our gutter. Using warm water, we freed his mangled leg and he flew away. Two weeks later, he returned to our feeder, without the hurt leg. He has adapted by balancing on one foot and using his wing to help support his body. He frequently feeds on the ground. What an amazing adaptation.

Sue Gillis
Ithaca, Tompkins County

Accidents frequently happen in nature. When an animal loses a limb, it is that much harder for the animal to survive, but they can, and sometimes do, adapt remarkably well. I once had a one-legged common crow frequent our yard for a period of a couple years. I nicknamed it "Hoppy," as it could not walk at all, and marveled at its ability to survive.

—Dave Nelson, Editor



Kooky-colored Cardinal



A few years ago, this odd-colored bird appeared in our backyard. I thought it was an immature cardinal, however more than a year later the bird still has its ghostly gray plumage, with very pale orange on its tail and wings. I've never seen a cardinal like this. Is it albino?

Noel J. Gish
Smithtown, Suffolk County

The cardinal appears to be “leucistic,” sometimes referred to as partially albino. Like albinism, leucism is a genetic mutation. Albinism is the total absence of melanin (a pigment found in skin, feathers, hair, etc.); leucism is when the melanin is not properly deposited in the feathers. Birds like these can be tricky to identify, and sometimes do not do well. Yours, however, has been around for a couple years at least, and seems to be doing just fine!

—Scott Stoner, DEC Research Scientist



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Ask the Biologist

Q: I see lots of squirrel leaf nests in the trees. What kind of squirrel makes these and how do they keep their nests together? Do they have something in their spit that sticks the leaves together? And do the squirrels live in these nests all winter? Aren't they cold?

Sophie Hardison
First Grade, Sackets Harbor Central School
Sackets Harbor, NY

A: Gray squirrels build the leaf nests you see in trees. The nests are used as an additional shelter for resting or to escape predators. Young are raised elsewhere—usually in hollowed out trees. Many of the leaf nests are built during mid-late summer, and again during the fall. The squirrel gathers leaves and twigs, which it then wedges between the tree branches, resulting in a densely intertwined very tight structure. While the nest appears quite large from the outside (up to two feet in diameter), the interior cavity may only be four to five inches wide. Each squirrel builds about two nests within its home range of about an acre. The nests are used year-round, whenever the squirrels are actively moving around.



This past fall I watched a squirrel build one of these nests. It made multiple, consecutive runs up and down the tree to collect leaves and tuck them into the crotch of a white pine. It collected oak and maple leaves, seeming to stuff as many as it could in its mouth, and then charged up the tree. It was frantic as it did this, making about 10 runs before stopping to just feed. My guess was that at that rate it would probably take about three days to build a nest.

—Gordon Batcheller, DEC Wildlife Biologist