



THE ILLINOIS PRAIRIE PATH NEWSLETTER

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WINTER AND SURVIVAL ALONG THE PRAIRIE PATH

Brush, thickets, brambles and tangles along the Path offer a green screen for privacy in the summer. They create diverse textures and colors, shade and coolness as we walk or ride along; however, it is in the winter that these become truly important.

There is no constantly available food supply for wild creatures, so they live under a seasonal threat of starvation. Winter, especially late winter, is a time of hardship because it is a critical period for food supply. The supply of both insect and plant food decreases markedly as weather grows colder. Insect supply suffers most, and wildlife species turn more and more to plant foods. Both plant and insect eaters must search more intensely and over wider areas to find food.

Plants with persistent seeds, fruits or other edible parts, carried high enough so they are above the snow, become valuable sources of food. Vines such as *poison ivy*, *Virginia creeper*, and *green brier* have seeds eaten by the downy woodpecker, flickers, robins, chick-a-dees and other birds. Other fruits and seeds obtainable above the snow line are the *haws* of the hawthorn, *crab apples*, *silky dogwood* and *junipers*. In some areas along the Path, acorns and the seeds within pine cones are eaten by both mammals and birds. *Sumac*, which usually doesn't provide choice food for wildlife, is eagerly gathered as a source of winter substance; seeds, bark and twigs are eaten. Arched canes of *raspberries* and *blackberries* that create wickets peaking above the snow show the sharp diagonal cut of the rabbit's harvest. Buds of the *willow*, *apple* and the remaining seeds of the *ash* are all eaten.

Even the weeds that cause us problems during their growth and pollen season have their use in harsh winter. *Burdock*, various *pigweeds* or *amaranthus*, *ragweed* or *ambrosia* (isn't it nice to know there is some purpose in its existence), some native *sunflowers*, and the *goosefoots* or *chenopodiums* remain persistent upon the dried stalks late into winter and are gathered by birds and rodents. When the snow melts, the leaves of *plantain* are a favorite food of the rabbit.

In areas where prairie grasses still persist, the goldfinches can be seen clinging to the stalks of *big blue stem* rejoicing in their feast. All areas of the Path give shelter and food in varying degrees.

In certain sections of the Path, citizens have removed plant cover so that human users of the Path will be "safe". But they have decreased the survival potential for the wildlife who not only "use", but live on, the Path. We share the world with other citizens and must recognize their needs. This commitment is made more important by the fact that these inhabitants cannot speak or represent their needs or rights. The continuous hedgerows formed on the sides of the Path represent survival for wildlife in an increasingly urban environment, as well as providing multi-uses for our human populations. We can, with a little concern, all share and survive together.

