

Flying south? It's all relative where that is.

Get to know your invaders. Just because this invasion season is starting a little slowly doesn't mean you won't be invaded. You will.

Birds go south in the winter. It's hard for some people to fathom that Maine is south, relatively speaking. We have our regular snowbirds that come down from the arctic in predictable numbers. American tree sparrows show up every winter, often foraging under feeders. Then we have our irregulars. Redpolls may invade one year, then be totally absent the next.

Maine's summer residents head to the same places every winter, usually in the tropics. Some go all the way to the southern tip of Argentina. But our arctic invaders are not nearly so predictable. They're accustomed to freezing weather, so they wander south only to find food and relief from abnormal chill. During a mild winter, they may never venture south of the Canadian border at all.

Moderate temperatures this year have kept things rather quiet around here. That can change at any moment. An arctic blast will send many Canadian birds scurrying to the lower 48. Even if winter stays mild, some will exhaust the food supply farther north and

look for greener pastures here.

Bohemian waxwings almost always show up sooner or later. Be on the lookout for this invader among crab apples and ornamental berries. I usually spy a few while Christmas shopping, but the only ones I've noted so far this year were up in the woods west of Baxter fully two months ago. There were three. Later in winter, they can gather by the thousands.

Pine grosbeaks are another fruit eater that devours our berries in winter. I haven't seen any this year, even in their favorite spots. Two years ago, they arrived before the maples had turned red, then were totally gone again by New Years. Last year they came late, with hundreds flooding the University of Maine campus in early February. It all depends on the availability of food and reasonable weather up north.

I invite you to share my winter fun in watching small finches. American goldfinches, pine siskins and common redpolls are closely related. Goldfinches and siskins nest in Maine.



BOB DUCHESNE
GOOD BIRDING



BOB DUCHESNE

Common Redpoll

Redpolls are subarctic breeders, with a tendency to invade southward. These three species often associate because they like the same small seeds and the advantages of safety in numbers.

Every winter, the mix of these three species is different. Cold weather drives the goldfinches to Massachusetts. Colder weather drives the siskins there, too. But cold weather draws the redpolls here. In changeable weather, mixed flocks of all

three can start nibbling on your Nyjer seed in the thistle feeder. It's a good way to judge how winter is progressing.

The first half of December was mild. Under such conditions, there is plenty of natural food in the woods, and small finches don't visit feeders very much. Over the first two weeks of this month, I've only had a few goldfinches show up at the feeder. However, when I walk around my neighborhood, I can actually hear

them up in the treetops, and I can pick out the buzzier sound of a few siskins among them. My feeders are fully stocked, waiting for the inevitable snow that will drive them to my backyard.

I haven't seen one yet, but I've been expecting redpolls. A phenomenon occurred just north of us in late October. The Tadousac Bird Observatory in Quebec reported a record number of redpolls flying by in a seven-hour span.

They tallied 15,790 redpolls on Oct. 26. That beat the old record by more than a thousand. Most redpolls will stay above the St. Lawrence River, but some are bound to come this way. The Observatory is only about 50 miles away from our border. In fact, a few redpolls have already been meandering around Aroostook County.

Snowy owls are definitely invading. Several have been witnessed in The County. They're on mountain tops in Acadia. And several have been tallied in southern Maine, including two at the old Brunswick Naval Air Station. I'm not expecting the huge influx we experienced over the last three winters, but they won't be rare, either.

I saw only one northern shrike all last winter. They should invade in bigger numbers this year. I'm also expecting more crossbills. Numbers have been low recently, but the spruce cone crop has rebounded and it's only a matter of time until they also invade us again. Bring it on.

Bob Duchesne serves as vice president of Maine Audubon's Penobscot Valley Chapter. He developed the Maine Birding Trail, with information at mainebirding-trail.com. He can be reached at duchesne@midmaine.com.



GABOR DEGRE | BDN

Jonathan Carter of Glenburn fishes for smallmouth bass on Alamoosook Lake in Orland on Wednesday. Carter, an aspiring professional bass fisherman, took advantage of the unusually mild weather to get in some fishing time before the lakes freeze over.

Fishing

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As legions of ice anglers wait for their local hotspots to freeze up, few are out on the water the same way Carter is, state fisheries biologists say. Many have simply turned the page on their calendars from "open-water" season and are waiting for the next opportunity to present itself.

"Once the spawning season [for trout and landlocked salmon] has gone by, which is basically right now, we see hardly any open-water use on lakes and ponds," said Francis Brautigam, a fisheries biologist in the Sebago Lake region for the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife.

Brautigam said there's a natural progression of outdoor activities in Maine that many enthusiasts embrace.

"If you're a traditional Maine outdoorsman, you're going to get your boat ready in March and you'll be out there fishing in April, and you're going to fish through the summer," Brautigam said. "Then, when you get closer to the hunting season — usually in September and October — you're going to winterize your boat or have it winterized, and you're switching gears into the hunting season. And then, as hunting season winds down, you start thinking about ice fishing."

An exception, according to biologists, is that hardcore fly anglers still target flowing water where it's legal to fish — relatively few allow fishing in the winter — whenever possible. In southern Maine, for



GABOR DEGRE | BDN

Jonathan Carter of Glenburn hold up a smallmouth bass he caught in Alamoosook Lake in Orland on Wednesday.

instance, fly fishers flock to the Presumpscot, Saco, Royal and Mousam rivers.

Gregory Burr, the regional fisheries biologist in the Grand Lakes Region, said that most anglers, of which there are relatively few in his area, who take advantage of the extended season on lakes and ponds focus their efforts on fall fishing.

"Fewer than that continue to take advantage of those opportunities here with the warmer weather in December Down East," Burr said in an email.

With that said, he admitted that there are plenty of ice-free options for folks who just can't wait to fish again, as long as they're willing to troll or cast from shore. A few of the options he suggested: Indian Lake in Whiting, Little Tunk Pond in Sullivan, Keene's Lake in Calais and Bubble Pond in Bar Harbor.

Wes Ashe, an assistant regional biologist who works out of Sidney, said many of the lakes and ponds in that area — Region B — not only allow year-round fishing, but also allow the harvest of some fish.

Though conditions have

been tough on ice anglers thus far, he said there's are a few different kinds of people who like to fish through the ice.

"I think we may have three different groups of ice anglers this time of year," Ashe wrote in an email. "Exclusive ice anglers who are currently playing the waiting game ... ice anglers who also take advantage of all the open-water angling opportunities, and ice anglers who would take advantage of all the open water angling opportunities, but currently aren't aware that they exist."

A check of the state's fishing rulebook can clear up any confusion.

Tim Obrey, the regional fisheries biologist in the Moosehead Lake Region — a winter playground for many Mainers — said Jack Frost has also been absent in his neck of the woods.

"It's looking pretty grim up here for early January ice fishing," Obrey said in an email. "In a normal year, we see East Cove in Greenville 'catch' around the week of Thanksgiving. It has tried several times with no success. We really need a prolonged stretch of calm,

cold weather to get this winter started."

When it does get colder, Obrey said anglers will have a few promising options.

"Ponds like Fitzgerald, Prong, Brann's Mill and Harlow/Manhanock usually freeze the earliest and our heavy stocking programs in those waters provide great early season brook trout ice fishing, year in-year out," Obrey wrote.

Up in Aroostook County — Region G among the state's fisheries — things are different ... right?

After all, Aroostook is our northernmost county, and us mid-Mainers sometimes assume it's always cold and icy.

Not so fast.

"Region G has no waters safe to ice fish on on this date, and I don't expect any to be fishable in the near future," regional biologist Frank Frost reported via email on Wednesday. "Once we do get safe ice, I expect the fishing to be excellent on a number of waters [where] we stock the larger fall yearling brook trout and retired brood fish."

While Frost said his crew is seeing nobody taking advantage of the lakes and ponds that are open to year-round fishing, there is an exception on flowing water.

"The lower Fish River in Fort Kent is developing into a great fishery," he wrote. "While there are only a few people using it at this point, the interest is there and growing — fishing for wild and hatchery landlocked salmon can be excellent in this reach that is about 7.5 miles long from the Fish River Falls to the St. John River."

Things to Do Outdoors

AUGUSTA — Maine Beginner Hiking/Snowshoeing Meetup for Women, 9-10:30 a.m. Sunday, Dec. 27, at Augusta Nature Center's trailhead located at end of Haskell Street near trailhead kiosk. Arrive a few minutes early so the group may depart at 9 a.m. Weather will determine whether it's a snowshoe or hike. Updates posted at www.augustanature-center.com/index.html. Optional meetup after hike at Juiced, 130 Water St., Hallowell.

BREWER — Penobscot Fly Fishers annual eight-week basic fly tying class, 6-8 p.m. Mondays, beginning Jan. 4, at Penobscot County Conservation Association, 570 North Main St. The course fee is \$40 and includes all the necessary materials and the use of fly-tying tools during class time. All students under 17 years of age must be accompanied by an adult. www.penobscotflyfishers.com/fly-tying-classes.htm. For information, contact Rob Dunnett at 907-9008 or email treasurer@penobscotflyfishers.com. Class limited to 30 students.

BREWER — Author and retired Maine Warden John Ford and retired Maine State Trooper Mark Nickerson to tell tales of law enforcement in Maine "back in the day," 5:30-7 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 7, at Brewer Public Library, 100 South Main St. 989-7943.

FALMOUTH — Maine Audubon and Evelyn Rysdyk and Allie Knowlton from Spirit Passages will celebrate the winter solstice with storytelling by Margi Huber, rituals from around the world, a fire ceremony and more, 7-8:30 p.m. Friday, Dec. 18, Gilsland Farm Audubon Center, 20 Gilsland Farm Road. Refreshments. Prices \$5 for members; \$7 for non-members. Refreshments will be served afterwards. 781-2330.

FREEPORT — Free demonstration on how to set up a tent, 10-11:30 a.m. Saturday, Dec. 19, L.L. Bean, 95 Main St.

GRAND LAKE STREAM — Snowshoeing adventure led by Downeast Lakes Land Trust education and outreach manager Colin Brown, 2-4 p.m. Friday, Jan. 15, meet at Grand Lake Stream

School Building. Look for animal tracks and learn to identify trees in winter. Bring snowshoes and water, dress warmly. 796-2100 or cbrown@downeastlakes.org.

GRAND LAKE STREAM — Downeast Lakes Land Trust sponsors "Allagash Tails and Tales," narrated by author and former ranger supervisor Tim Caverly, 6-7:30 p.m. Monday, Jan. 25, Grand Lake Stream School Building, 15 Water St. Music, scenic and historic photographs from Maine's North Woods. 796-2100 or cbrown@downeastlakes.org.

MAINE — Annual Maine Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count, 8 a.m.-5 p.m. through Tuesday, Jan. 5, at various locations throughout Maine. It is the National Audubon Society's 116th year of Christmas bird counts. For specific dates, visit <http://maine-audubon.org/birding/christmas-bird-count/>.

ORRINGTON — "The Night Tree: A Solstice Celebration," 4-5:30 p.m. Monday, Dec. 21, Fields Pond. Re-creating Eve Bunting's story "The Night Tree" by decorating trees with food for wildlife. Cost is \$10 for member families; \$15 for nonmembers.

WHITEFIELD — Winter solstice hike and hearty soup with Maine Master Naturalist Kit Pfeiffer of the Whitefield Trails Committee, 10 a.m.-1:30 p.m. Tuesday, Dec. 22, meeting at the parking lot of Whitfield Salmon Preserve, Howe Road. Wear sturdy shoes and layers appropriate for the weather. Bring a hot or cold beverage, camera and binoculars. Suggested donation: \$5. Advanced registration required. Call 563-1363.

For a complete listing of calendar items or to submit your event, visit www.bangordailynews.com.

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