

February, 2021



The Sugarbush Gazette

A Publication of the Friends of MacKenzie

*Supporting Environmental Education
and
Outdoor Skill Development*

“Groundhog found fog. New snows and blue toes. Fine and dandy for Valentine candy. Snow spittin’; if you’re not mitten-smitten, you’ll be frost-bitten! By jing-y, feels spring-y.” ...The Old Farmers’ Almanac

February

February is derived from the Latin term ‘Februarius’ meaning to purify. Februum, the Roman Feast of Purification, preceded the growing season and, like January, was a time for reflection on the past year and anticipation of the coming growing season. The month was similar to a spring cleaning.

February Facts

- It is the only month that may not have a full moon; however, it usually does
- There is a 1 in 1461 chance of being born on February 29th. If so, you are known as a ‘leaper’ or ‘leapling’.
- February is one of the most commonly misspelled words in the English language.
- February is known for Groundhog Day and Valentine’s Day (see below).
- For over 40 years, February is also known as Black History Month.

Groundhog Day

Groundhog Day, celebrated on February 2nd in the United States and Canada, is a tradition with historical roots tied to the German feast of Candlemas. In Germany, the animal coming out of its den was a European badger. If the badger came out and saw its shadow on a sunny day, it was frightened and quickly returned to its underground burrow signifying several more weeks of winter. If emerging on a cloudy day with no shadow, the badger would remain active above ground signifying an early spring.

The tradition was continued in North America, especially by the German people living in Pennsylvania. The best known American prognosticator is Punxsutawney Phil. He has been predicting the coming spring since 1886. In Wisconsin, the most famous weatherman, or weatherchuck, is Jimmy the Groundhog from Sun Prairie. He has been predicting the coming spring since 1948.



So, who is the better prognosticator? It depends on whom you ask. If you are from Pennsylvania, Punxsutawney Phil is 100% accurate - talk about fake news. If, however, we allow the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to act as arbiter, the results are somewhat different. By their account, and by other scientific accounts, Punxsutawney Phil is accurate around 39% of the time. Jimmy the Groundhog has an accuracy rate of 80%. Then again, interpreting the forecasts of the woodchucks is up to the local mayors, and their accuracy is equally questionable. In fact, one year Jimmy bit the nose of the mayor - was he making some sort of political statement?

What are the predictions for this year? Punxsutawney Phil saw his shadow, returned to his den, and Pennsylvania will have six more weeks of winter. Jimmy the Groundhog did not see his shadow and southern Wisconsin will welcome an early spring, but we wouldn't know it by the recent sub-zero temperatures.

Valentine's Day



Valentine's Day, celebrated on February 14th, is held in memory of St. Valentine, an early Christian martyr put to death by the Romans in A.D. 270. (actually, there appear to have been three Valentines, all martyred by the Romans during this time period). Valentinus was claimed to be a kind

and endearing individual and the Christian tradition of giving gifts to those you love has been celebrated ever since.

However, history is often open to interpretation, and many believe that the holiday is, in part, a commemoration of the pagan festival of Lupercalia, a fertility event celebrated on February 15th. The festival was held in honor of Faunus, the Roman god of agriculture in the hope of a successful growing season with good fertility. Whether it is Christian, pagan, or a combination of both, share the day with those close to you,

Maple Program and Maple Fest Cancelled

With the continuing Covid-19 crisis, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resource has cancelled all state sponsored events at the MacKenzie Center until April 30th. As such, the Maple Program, where students learn the history of maple syruping, and Maple Fest, a celebration held on the first weekend in April, will not occur this year. The MacKenzie Center is following the directive issued for all state park properties.

Beginning in February, the Maple Program provides students with an opportunity to learn about the making of maple syrup. Students learn how to identify maple trees and how to tap this tree using hand drills and wooden or metal spiles. If conditions are favorable, they may get a chance to taste the sap as it begins to flow. When leaving the tree, the sap is about 3% sugar. Some students can taste the sweetness, but unfortunately, I cannot.



A metal sap bucket is attached and covered with a lid (see the pencil drawing at the head of this newsletter). Sap is collected, run through filters, and boiled in an evaporating pan until most of the water is removed. The remaining liquid is 60-65% sugar. This liquid is removed from the evaporating pan, filtered one more time, heated and finished to create maple syrup, 67% sugar. If the liquid were further heated, it would begin to crystallize forming a solid maple sugar.

Students also learn of the culture and syruping techniques of the First Nation Ho-Chunk and the early Wisconsin pioneers. In a typical year, DNR staff and volunteers will tap over 120 black and sugar maple trees. It takes a lot of work, but the smiles on the faces

of the students and adults when they get an opportunity to taste the sap and to taste pure maple syrup is well worth the effort.

Will the maples miss the students trampling underfoot? Will the sound of dripping sap be absent from our sugarbush? Unfortunately, the answers for this year are yes. We hope to see you in 2022.



Board of Directors

At the annual meeting, the Friends of MacKenzie nominated and elected two new board members. Kim SperryFrazier is a retired school teacher from the Milton School District presently living in Janesville. Kim has brought students to the MacKenzie Center for several years. Sue Hill is a chemist for the University of Wisconsin State Hygiene Lab with an emphasis on water pollution. She has acted as a guide for the Center's Maple Program and has volunteered at Maple Fest and Fall Festival. Sue lives in DeForest, WI.

The 2021 Board of Directors includes:

President - Carl Bujanowski
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Treasurer - Don Jackson
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Kim SperryFrazier
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MacKenzie Center Master Plan

A Master Plan for the Central Sand Hills Ecological Landscape is being developed by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. The Central Sand Hills is a collection of state-owned properties in parts of Marquette, Adams, Columbia, Dane, Green Lake,

Portage, Sauk, Waushara, Waupaca, and Winnebago Counties. The MacKenzie Center is located within the Central Sand Hills geographical area and is included in this plan.

A draft Master Plan is expected to be completed in spring 2021 and the final Master Plan completed by the end of the year. There will be opportunities for the public to provide input on the management of these areas. While most of the DNR properties located in the Central Sand Hills are managed for recreational uses, the MacKenzie Center is a unique property in that it provides for environmental education and the development of outdoor skills. The public has supported the MacKenzie Center and environmental education in the past, and we hope for your continued support.

Changes

As I write this newsletter, I am aware of the changes in nature from month to month and from season to season. On a recent walk, I thought of the changes I have observed from my childhood to the present. Some of the changes I would consider to be positive, some negative. My list is by no means exhaustive or complete - just the musings of a man on a winter walk. I will add further comments in later newsletters.

I grew up in Madison near Lake Mendota. Each morning in spring and summer, I would awaken to the gurgles and chortles of purple martins occupying the bird house, or bird hotel, in our backyard. In August, these martins, and others nearby, would gather shoulder to shoulder on utility lines prior to their southern migration. I still see martin houses in Madison, but very few house martins.

If I were to look upon the evening sky, I might hear the 'peenting' of nighthawks flying about in search of insects. Again, I do not see this species as often as I once did. Another insect-eating species not as commonly seen is the whip-poor-will. When I began turkey hunting in the 1990's, these birds would greet my arrival in the pre-dawn hours - not so much anymore.



Canada geese were seen during spring and fall migrations, rarely in summer, hardly ever in winter. Today, the Giant Canada goose is a year-round resident commonly seen in parks and golf courses - sometimes to the dismay of those who prefer to walk barefoot. Sandhill cranes are also common in city parks. If I take a one-hour stroll through my neighborhood in Madison, I regularly see three crane families with young as

well as other cranes without young. Watching the young geese and cranes develop is an enjoyment I did not have when I was younger.



Within five miles of my home, there are three bald eagle nests. All have been active in the past few years. The first bald eagle I saw was near the dam at Prairie du Sac, and that was in winter. To see a nesting bald eagle, I needed to travel to northern Wisconsin. With the exception of Milwaukee County, eagles nest in every

county of the state. Golden eagles can also be seen in Wisconsin in the colder months, but I do not believe they nest here.

A pair of peregrine falcons nests in a breeding box on the smokestack of the Madison Gas and Electric plant a few blocks from the State Capitol. They, along with some bald eagle and other species nests, can be viewed live online throughout the nesting season. Peregrines also nest on the smokestack of the Alliant Energy facility south of Portage, Wisconsin.

And then there are turkeys - everywhere. Roaming bands of jakes, immature males, commonly stop traffic or harass postal carriers in Madison. Turkeys were reintroduced into our state in the 1970's. Today, they are common, or abundant, throughout the state.



Reasons for population declines include loss of habitat, pesticide use, climate change, human encroachment, and problems on wintering grounds for migratory birds. Increases are the result of pesticide regulation (DDT, PCB's, etc.), managing the habitat, and partnerships among the Wisconsin DNR, federal agencies, and universities in cooperation with foundations, corporations, and organizations.

More changes in coming newsletters ... can you think of others?

February Phenology

The full moon, or Snow Moon, can be seen on Saturday, February 27th.

Five planets are visible in the sky - Venus, Jupiter, and Saturn in the morning sky; Mars and Mercury in the evening sky.

Wisconsin's wild canids (wolves, coyotes, and foxes) are breeding.
Listen for bird songs on warm, sunny days - cardinals, chickadees, and robins
Other birds return to establish and defend breeding territories - Sandhill cranes,
red-winged blackbirds, killdeer, bluebirds, and turkey vultures.
Some bald eagles begin egg-laying.
Raccoons, opossums, and skunks are more active.
Watercress may be harvested in cool springs.
Skunk cabbage, with a high respiration rate, 'breathes' through snow in marshes. Can
the male catkins (flowers) of pussy willow be far behind?
Red-osier dogwood bark is becoming very bright.
Sap begins to flow in maple trees. Squirrels and deer nibble at twigs. If the sap drips
and freezes, icicles, or 'sapsicles', may form.

Stay Connected

Friends of MacKenzie website: www.friendsofmackenzie.org

Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/Friends-of-the-MacKenzie-Education-Center>

MacKenzie Center website: <https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/education/mackenzie>

*Happy Valentine's Day
From
The Friends of MacKenzie*



*"When we're out together dancing beak to beak."
Fred Astaire (R) and Ginger Rogers (L)*

