

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



Who doesn't love making a snowman? Photo: K. Rossini.

Be a Winter Explorer

Don't count winter out when it comes to enjoying the outdoors. Snow transforms our landscape in a most magical way.

By J. Morton Galetto

As winter weather settles in, I suppose many of us just want to curl up with a nice book somewhere inside, possibly by a cozy fire. Or some may choose to binge-watch a TV series that they have never seen. I understand.

But there are great benefits to exploring the outdoors in winter, especially in Southern

New Jersey. For one thing the usual insect pests, like gnats, mosquitoes, greenhead flies, deer flies and to some extent ticks, are sequestered for winter, giving us a brief respite from their attacks. Female mosquitoes overwinter, asleep, in hollow logs and protected spaces like building foundations. Greenhead and deer flies are in a larva state beneath the ground. Ticks stay under leaf litter and woody debris, although unfortunately on warmer days they *will* emerge. Therefore one must be vigilant year round about checking for these creatures after being outdoors. Nevertheless we are largely free from their pesky presence.



This cardinal fluffs up its feathers to trap and air, then warms it between its plumage in a process called ptiloerection. Photo: Tony Klock.

Snowfall affords a magical opportunity to explore for signs of nature. For the moment, set aside its negative aspects and instead see the endless beauty – the sparkle of a fresh fallen snow. Prior to a shovel, a foot print, or a plow, only a bird track skims the perfectly unmarred surface. Song birds tread lightly on the surface and leave nearly imperceptible trails.

In the wee hours of morning a blanket of snow seems to mute the hustle-bustle of the world, and we are left to see it momentarily free of the human clutter of traffic and noise. Often our outdoor possessions are hidden from view and we have a moment to visualize the earth in a seemingly pristine state.

Sometimes the magical silence is broken by a tree's branch, heavily laden in snow, breaking free from the trunk with a mighty cracking sound. Frequently you hear sounds of a distant snowplow scraping the surface of the road. Even the roar of the plow brings back memories of my childhood; how wonderful it would be to capture that youth again. How wonderful it would be to get more than a few snowfalls, or even a single significant one, this winter. Climate change is undeniable. Ice houses used to be stacked with blocks cut from Union Lake. For years the surface hasn't even supported skating.

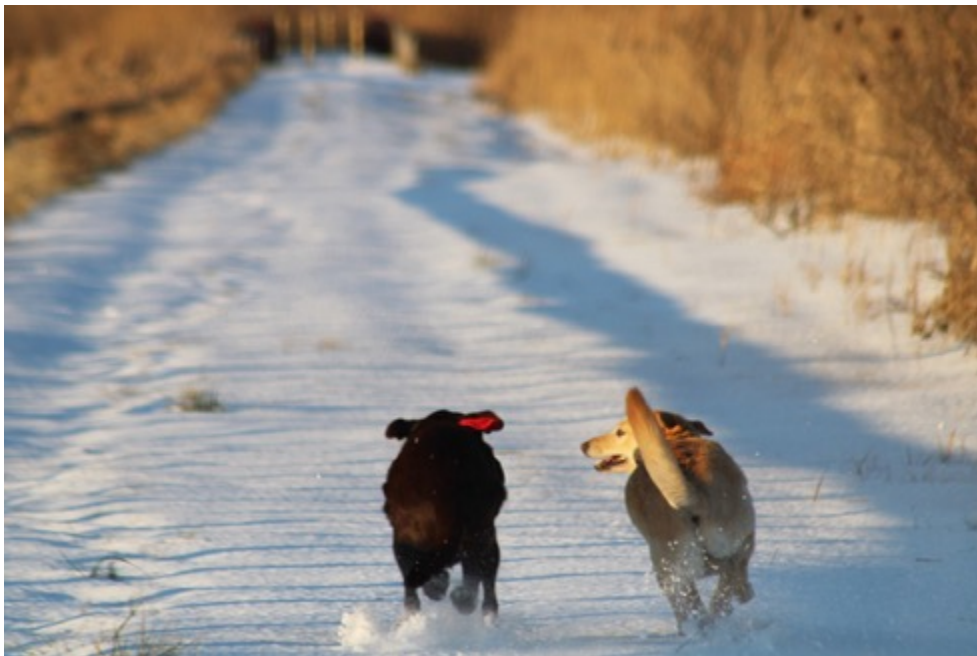
It's fun to see objects cloaked in snow, leaving marshmallow-like sculptural outlines of themselves. Sharp edges are smoothed and the world takes on a soft appearance.



Don't forget your camera on winter walks. The author captured a snow covered Menantico Creek in Vineland, Photo: J. Morton Galetto

I recall mornings seated by the radio listening and hoping to hear my school announce a snow day: "Hooray!" I reminisce about making snow angels, igloos, snowmen, the fun of catching snowflakes in my mouth, and the joys of sledding. I envision groups of children, over-dressed Weebles, clinging to the ropes of their sleds and heading for the closest slope.

I think of our young dogs who had never seen snow before, yet know it is to be embraced. They frolic in it, revel in the experience, racing about with joyous and reckless abandon, as if they have always known snow would arrive. They bite at the surface of the snow and capture a thrown snowball, only to be confounded by its disintegrating in their mouths.



Dogs dash out to make the first tracks in the snow. Photo: T. Klock.

While frolicking in the snow may challenge my physical abilities today, the next best thing is to accompany a young person on a snowy experience. Don't forget a camera to capture those beautiful wintery moments.



Capturing dark skies against a white landscape can be striking. Delaware Bayshore, Sayer's Neck Rd., Lawrence Township. Photo: T. Klock.

Look for animal tracks with a youngster. Often a good snowfall reveals the many animals using an area that you were formerly unaware of being present. Fox, coyotes, rabbits, turkey, deer, raccoons are all common tracks in our region. Note how a fox's tracks are in a straight line and a domestic dog's are more variable.



*Animal tracks like those of passerine birds left on the snow's surface leave clues about what animals frequent an area.
Photo: T. Klock.*

One of my favorite stories of a *snowfall reveal* occurred back in 1985. A park in Teaneck was finding rabbit carcasses lined up with only the heart and lungs removed. A fund for animals posted a \$1,000 reward, thinking some bizarre cult might be to blame. But when state pathologist Doug Roscoe was called to investigate he found no footprints near the carcasses, simply wing prints in the snow. Evidently food was plentiful enough that a great horned owl was excising its preference for only specific blood rich organs.

Take time to discuss snowflakes and how no two are identical. Evidently you can hold a hand full of black paper, catch some flakes,

and examine them with a hand-held magnifying glass. I've not done this but I surely hope to try it out. Teachers recommend the book "*Snowman Bentley*" for studying these natural wonders.

A snowy full moon night often offers enough illumination to navigate a woods path. Listen for night sounds. Great horned owls are early nesters and you may hear them calling to one another. Calls across the snowy silence are more dramatic than when leaves make rustling sounds under your feet.

On no-moon nights remember to stargaze. Nightfall is early in the winter and skies are often clearer, lacking the humidity of the summer. Share some constellation stories with a child or a friend. Maybe take a map of the constellations along or use a phone application. Some optics can enhance the experience. If the moon is out, enjoy its cratered surface through binoculars.

When you return home a great activity is to record the things you saw and heard in a journal. Encourage making a few sketches. And maybe serve up mugs of hot chocolate.

Taking a hike is a great way to exercise and spend some quality time with your children, grandchildren, or a favorite youngster. Last year I wrote an article about staying warm

outside, so I'll spare you my recommendations here and simply say, "Dress for the weather, from head to toe." With today's gear and fabrics it is possible to keep warm with less bulk than in the past.

In the absence of snow you can still do most of these activities. Winter hiking is great way to warm up on a chilly day, but next snowfall, remember there's plenty more to do than shovel!

Maybe I will frolic; maybe I'll make a snow angel. Maybe you might, too.

