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## Earth Almanac: October/December 2003

By Ted Williams

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Photo by Craig Cutler

### Treasure From the Winter Woods

Among the treasures to be collected from the winter woods are pine cones—the reproductive structures of an ancient genus that preceded flowering plants by 50 million years and whose Devonian age contemporaries are now coal. The cones you'll want to pick up are the larger, seed-bearing females. Hard pines—such as red, lodgepole, shortleaf, longleaf, slash, ponderosa, pitch, and loblolly—generally produce woody, thick-scaled cones armored with pricklers. Soft pines—such as eastern white, western white, sugar pine, whitebark, limber, foxtail, bristlecone, and pinyon—produce softer, smoother, more elongated cones. Even when dry and seedless, the female cones of sugar pines can measure nearly two feet and weigh a pound. Ripe cones of hard pines make superb bird feeders. Fill

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all nooks with peanut butter, then roll the cones in birdseed. Ripe cones of soft pines are best for fire starters. Soak them in melted paraffin or candle wax. For red flames, pre-soak cones in strontium chloride, then dry; for purple, use potassium chloride; for green, copper sulfate; for orange, calcium chloride (all available at chemical supply houses). For yellow flames, use salty water; for white, Epsom salts.

## Hark, the Cardinals Sing

You'll start to hear it throughout most of our nation as the sun pushes higher into the winter sky—a clear, ringing caroling that comes before almost any other sign of spring—maybe a whistled *purdy, purdy, purdy* or a *cheer, cheer, cheer* or a *whit-chew, whit-chew, whit-chew*. It's the song of the northern cardinal, another adaptive species that is thriving and extending its range. It's not just the male you're hearing; the female counters his notes with loud caroling of her own, eliciting matching notes from her prospective mate. As courtship continues into late winter, the male will bring the female food, tilting his head to place it in her beak. In response, she'll flutter her wings in fledglinglike excitement. To attract cardinals, put out black sunflower seed and cracked corn. They'll come to feeders but prefer to forage on the ground.

## Ice Turtles

For most any American, save residents of the Southwest and far and central West, finding painted turtles basking in the July sun entails no more than a stroll to the nearest wetlands. But finding them under or on the ice is a challenge and, therefore, good fun. Not only are painted turtles the most widely distributed aquatic reptiles in the United States and Canada, they are the most tolerant of cold. When pond ice is clear, look for them resting on or moving slowly across the bottom. On warm days in late winter, you may encounter them basking on the edge of retreating ice. Freshwater turtles are able to hibernate underwater by absorbing oxygen through their skin, but only the painted turtle can survive a winter in water that has been deoxygenated by decaying plant matter. It accomplishes this by anaerobic respiration. Because this strategy produces lactic acid, which disrupts blood chemistry, the painted turtle must break down the acid by releasing carbonate from its shell and bones—basically, consuming its own skeleton. The next time you see one of these strikingly beautiful turtles, pause for an instant and celebrate nature's resiliency, and rejoice in the fact that there is lots of wildlife that isn't disappearing.

## Snooping on Song Dogs

Winter, when breeding increases coyotes' activity and their passage is recorded in fresh snow, is a fine time to snoop into their private lives. Coyotes leave straighter trails than dogs, and their prints are less splayed. If you've seen tracks, or even if you haven't, stand at night on the edge of a meadow or lake or anyplace your voice will carry, and howl. You don't have to get it anywhere near right; the coyotes probably know you're a fake, but often they can't stand not to comment. Soon you'll be left out of the conversation. In the face of intense human persecution, and perhaps because of it, coyotes have extended their range from the western plains to the rest of the continental United States. Coyotes are larger and more wolflike in the East, where they were first noticed in the early 20th century. They may have hybridized with wolves on their way from the West, or they may have been present all along, mistaken for small wolves by early settlers. A coyote will frequently hunt with a

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badger, apparently showing it where to dig out burrowing prey that the two will share. Although a badger will sourly reject a coyote's invitations to romp, when the badger approaches a coyote, the coyote will wag its tail and roll on its back in delight. A badger will allow a coyote to rest beside it and even touch it. The partnership is no anomaly; in fact, when some coyote researchers see a badger in spring or early summer, they instinctively look for its coyote companion.

## Silk Purses

When autumn dies, so do the beautiful black-and-yellow orb weavers whose dew-spangled webs stretched across garden paths and meadow grass just about everywhere in the contiguous 48 states. But during winter young garden spiders hatch in sacks that may contain as many as 1,400 eggs. They molt inside, then emerge in spring, crawling off or flying away on silk parachutes thrown to the wind. Look for the pear-shaped, inch-long paperlike sacks hanging from tall weed and grass stems, especially in locations where you've seen webs.

## Snow Bunnies

As the days dwindle down, the fur of the snowshoe hare goes white, but unlike the pelage of other mammals—including, alas, us—it will become brown again in spring. If a hare goes white before the snow falls, it's in big trouble, because amid bare hardwoods or black conifers it stands out like phosphorus in a night sea. The snowshoe part of its name derives from large, splayed hind feet that allow it to travel easily over snow. Throughout its range—from Alaska, across most of Canada and our northern states, and down the spines of the Rockies and the Alleghenies—few prey species are more abundant or subject to wilder population swings. In good hare years predators such as owls, foxes, fishers, and lynx thrive. But as hares proliferate, they deplete their bark-and-twig food supplies, triggering a population crash that soon extends to their major predators.