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## Earth Almanac: January/February 2007

By Ted Williams

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Joel Sartore

### Night Glider

Screech owls breed earlier than most birds so that when their owlets are being fed there will be an abundance of hatchlings, large insects, and rodents. Now, in open woodlands, orchards, and even city parks throughout most of the contiguous states, courtship is in full swing. But so nocturnal is this little raptor that you are more likely to hear it than witness it. If you're east of the Rockies, listen for a mournful, descending whinny or a mellow, muted trill. On the Pacific side, the western screech owl utters a series of soft notes in increasing tempo or a short, slow trill. (Screech owls screech only when severely agitated.) The male approaches the female, calling from different branches. He bobs, bows, swivels his head, snaps his beak, offers food, even winks. If she accepts him, the two touch bills, preen each other, and usually bond for life. Screech owls cache food. And in warm weather they sometimes release blind snakes in their nest cavities. The snakes live in the debris, eating insect larvae and apparently reducing parasitism of nestlings. Owlets from nests with snakes have been seen to grow faster and survive better.

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Ronald F. Billings/Texas Forest Service

## Beetle Art

Start researching bark beetles and you will find reams of literature on how to control them. But while a few species damage commercial timber stands—particularly monocultures—most attack only dead or moribund trees. And all native bark beetles play a vital role in forest ecology, providing food for insectivorous wildlife such as woodpeckers, encouraging shade-intolerant understory vegetation, and returning nutrients to the earth. It's virtually impossible to find a woodlot in North America that lacks at least one of the roughly 600 species. Now is the time to look for the engravings, especially if you have companions who suffer under the delusion that nature shuts down in winter. Peel away dead bark, and you'll find the tiny pupae and/or grublike larvae. But far more interesting and beautiful is the artwork—an egg tunnel excavated by the adult female with side galleries cut by the larvae and, depending on species, radiating from it in all manner of intricate and complex patterns. Bring charcoal and paper and make rubbings.

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## Bows to Holly

In much of our nation—particularly the Northeast—robins and bluebirds now spend the winter, switching their diet from insects to fruit. And no fruit is more relished by these (and traditional residents such as cedar waxwings and wild turkeys) than winterberry holly. From Newfoundland to Minnesota and south to Georgia and Texas, its scarlet fruits brighten backyards and winter wetlands. If you have not planted any in your yard, you can still attract these birds by cutting berry-laden sprigs and sticking them in the dirt or snow. If you get bluebirds, you can keep them long after the berries are gone by adding mealworms to glass bowls containing winterberries, then gradually weaning them to straight mealworms. When you plant winterberry in spring be sure to get the berry-producing females, though you'll need one male plant to fertilize them. Cultivars with such evocative names as "Afterglow," "Jim Dandy," "Red Sprite," "Southern Gentleman," "Stoplight," and "Sparkleberry" are readily available at nurseries, and they produce extra-large berries especially relished by birds.

## Last Leaves

For the tall, majestic northern red oak—naturally abundant in the eastern half of the United States save the coastal plains of the Gulf and south Atlantic states—fall often occurs in winter and sometimes doesn't end until spring, when new leaves push off old ones. Deciduous leaves are a relatively new event in the evolutionary history of oaks, and late shedding is thought to be a vestige of their evergreen past. These oases of foliage impart a sense of warmth to bare, snow-glazed hardwoods, and they provide cover for birds and other wildlife. Look for the large, inch-long acorns that are eaten by deer, bears, squirrels, raccoons, wild turkeys, bobwhite quail, ruffed grouse, woodpeckers, tufted titmice, chickadees, wood ducks, black ducks, mallards, golden-eyes, gadwalls, hooded mergansers, pintails, redheads, and green-winged teal. Northern red oaks are shade intolerant, and their acorns can't germinate to any major extent without openings in the forest canopy caused by such disturbances as insect infestations, wind, and forest fires.

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Joel Sartore

### **Mini Fox**

The house cat-size swift fox, North America's smallest wild canid and named for its remarkable speed, is rarely abroad by day. But now that breeding is under way, you may glimpse one at dusk near its den on the Great Plains, especially if you live in Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, or Wyoming. Because the swift fox needs shortgrass and midgrass prairies, its fortunes sank with the demise of the bison that maintained these habitats. In the absence of large grazers and with agricultural policies that favored fast-growing, nonnative grasses, tallgrass prairies began to dominate, eliminating the swift fox's ability to scan for enemies. Most hurtful was the mass poisoning of prairie dog towns, which removed its major prey item along with burrows that provided the foxes protection from golden eagles and coyotes. Finally, swift foxes are less wary than other canids and therefore more susceptible to poison baits set out for coyotes and wolves. Now, however, the future of the species appears brighter because of aggressive captive breeding and release programs in Canada and the United States, decreased prairie dog poisoning, and vastly curtailed chemical predator control.

### **Sea Pigs**

When the North Atlantic lashes remote beaches, and sand and cobbles glisten with frozen spindrift, grey seals—a.k.a. "horseheads"—haul out to deliver pups and mate. In the western population—from Cape Cod to Labrador—birthing and breeding is two or three months later than in the eastern population (from the British Isles to Russia). Look for grey seals lined up above the wave line, males hooting at one another and exchanging openmouthed threats. Males, sometimes three times larger than females and weighing as much as 880 pounds, have massive shoulders, wrinkled skin much scarred from fighting, and elongated snouts that earned them the nickname "horsehead" and the

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generic name *Halichoerus grypus*, Greek for "hook-nosed sea pig." The species had been severely depressed by hunting, but under protection of the Marine Mammals Act it is rebounding.