



sault
naturalists

Dunbar Forest Experimental Station

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- By Barb Scott

On the first day of February, 21 Sault Naturalists answered the call of the wild. The call was coming from Dunbar Forest Experimental Station, a 5,000-acre (2,023 hectare) field station in Barbeau, Michigan. It's the second-oldest and the largest experimental station owned by Michigan State University and has been used since 1925 to conduct long-term silviculture and plant genetics studies. We strapped on snowshoes and started our hike through the wetlands adjacent to the Saint Mary's River, where large alder bushes clustered but were not so dense so as to impede our progress. Like two years before, we found evidence of a recent



no blood. We conjectured that some sort of raptor had snatched up an eastern cottontail rabbit (which is more gray than brown in the winter) and had dinner elsewhere, although other possibilities exist.

Soon after we turned west away from the alders, we spied a small flock of turkeys farther down the pathway. They hot-

footed it into the maple forest before we could get too close, as many birds did that day. The species we did manage to see or hear with such a large group included:

- Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers
- White-breasted and Red-breasted Nuthatch
- Pileated Woodpecker
- Turkeys
- American Goldfinch
- Black-capped Chickadee
- Dark-eyed Junco
- American Tree Sparrow
- American Crow



kill. Black hair was strewn about the surface of the crusty snow, but there were only crow prints and

We passed through maple forest on an old road and skirted a recently clear-cut red pine stand, then a forest stand that had been selectively cut, leaving large trees tattooed with blue spray-painted numbers, most likely marked for research purposes. On the snow at our feet we didn't encounter tracks from the bears, wolves, or grouse known to inhabit Dunbar Forest. But we did note from all the tracks that the forest is supporting a large population of red squirrel and eastern cottontail rabbits, species that thrive in habitats

between woody areas and open land. We expected to see snowshoe hares more than cottontail rabbits due to the higher snowfall and dense forests in this part of the world.



A short while later our lunch break was taken in a spot within sight and sound of the Charlotte River, with a canopy of large, very old white spruce above us. While some were annoyed by the melting snow that was dripping off the spruces on to their heads, others noted that the stand of white spruce had reached its climax stage of development and that some trees had blown down, allowing young balsam fir to get established in the opened canopy.

The river itself was frozen over in spots, but after lunch we were content to meander off-trail along its floodplain, where we admired several huge tamaracks (larches).

Back on Scenic Drive, we took off our snowshoes and walked alongside a grove of old hemlocks as we made our way back to our cars at Dunbar Park, with one last stop at the neighbor's bird feeders to add a few to our species list. While the bird species diversity was not particularly high this day, the tree diversity made up for it.

Our après-hike destination, Cozy Corners restaurant, had quite the collection of exotic stuffed animals. Identifying them kept us busy and out of trouble while we waited for our food. Most agreed that the alligator at the center of the room was misidentified by the restaurant as a crocodile. We let that one go and headed home.

We are getting spoiled by having talented and generous photographers with us on these hikes – thank you to Chuck Miller for the photos in this report. Tip of the hat to Mark Harvey and Dave Euler for help with the tree and bird identification, respectively. For Renee's photos, please click here: <https://flic.kr/s/aHsmL8KMXu>



