

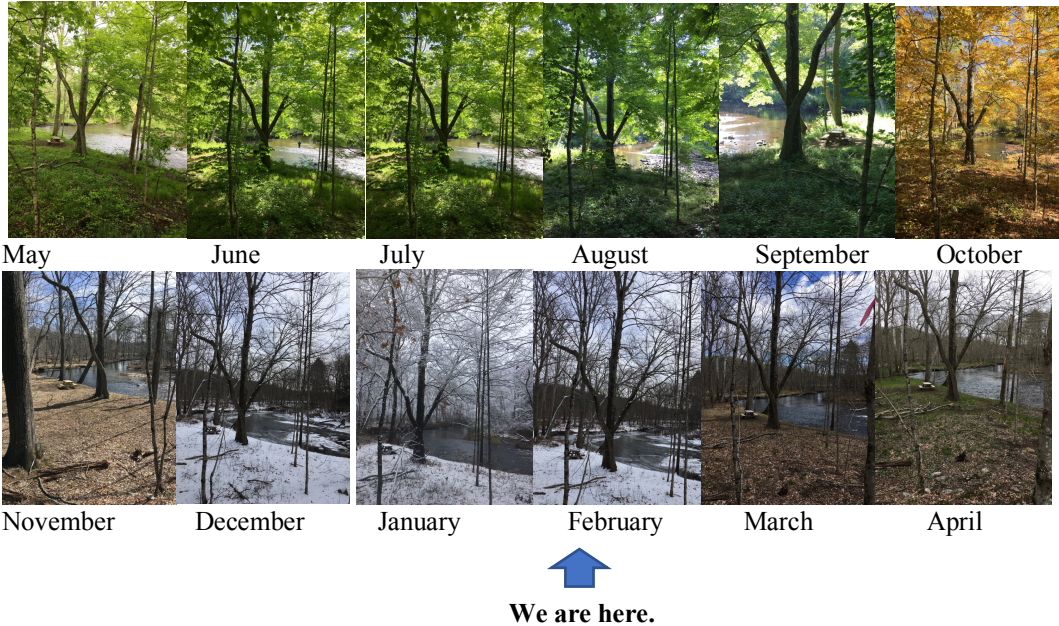
## Field Notes – FIRST WEEK OF FEBRUARY

Carrie Crompton

February 6, 2021

We're a little more than halfway through the three-month period between the Winter Solstice and the Vernal Equinox. We've gained a full hour of sunlight since the Solstice.

We're also about halfway through the six-month period of life without leaves over our heads. This is neither a meteorological nor an astronomical way of looking at the year, but it's the way I see it:



## LIKIN' WINTER

Most of my life, I've mourned the loss of color in the winter landscape. This year, I am determined to find and enjoy every bit of color I can. And what I find is that most of the patches of color are associated with rock.



Fluffy Dust Lichen, Utley Hill entry wall



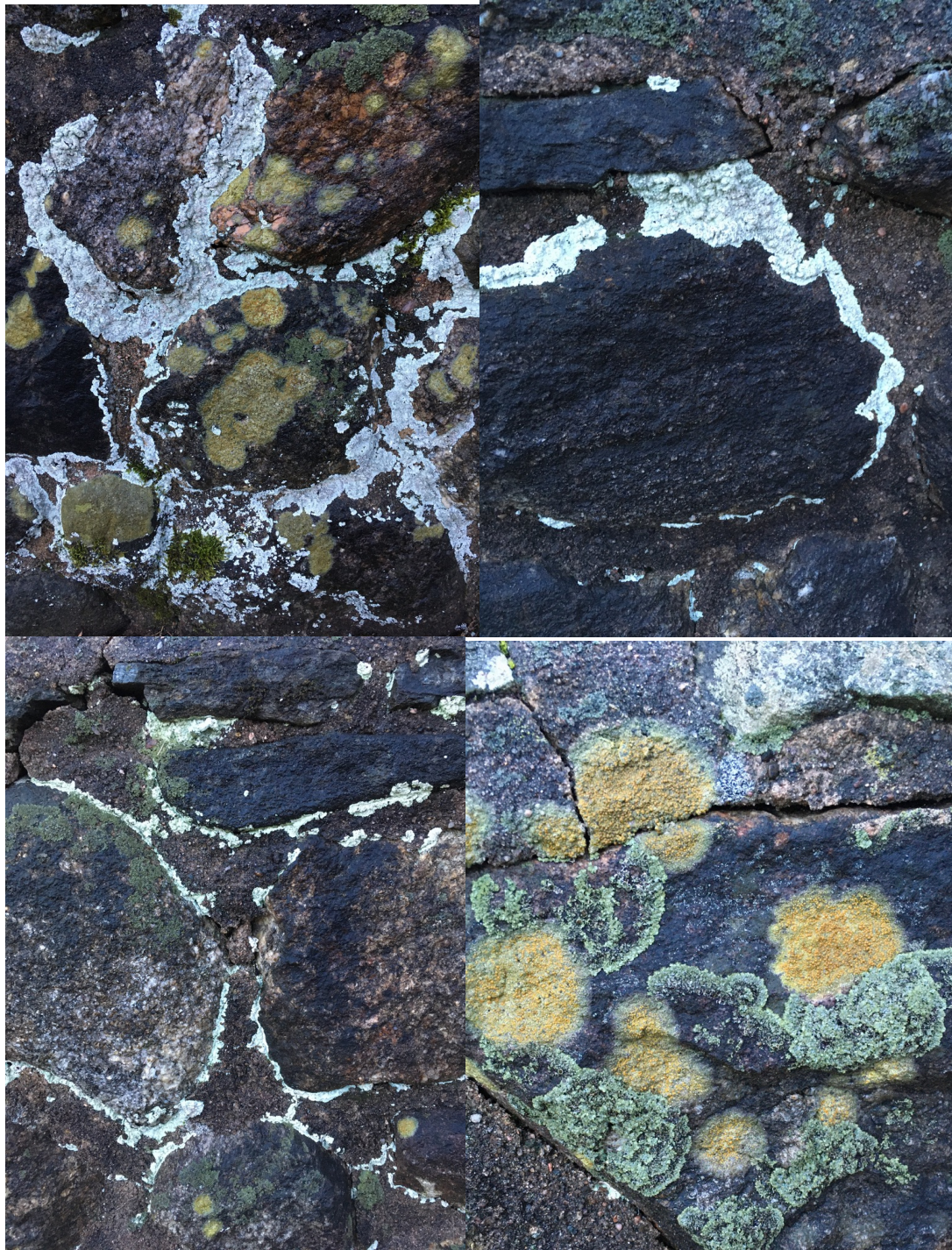


**Lichens growing on gravestones in Townsend Cemetery**



**More lichens in Townsend Cemetery**





**Lichens on the entrance wall to the Townsend Cemetery.**

The lichens appear like spontaneous Abstract Expressionist paintings after a rain or wet snowfall. Of course, they're always there, but moisture on the rock causes the fungal component to become more transparent and allows the photosynthetic pigments—and other pigments—of the algal component of the lichen to shine through. I've learned to identify a few, but lichens are a tricky subject, and I have to learn a lot more before I'm confident about naming more than a handful. My effort this year is simply to notice their forms and colors and where they are growing and wonder: Why is there fluffy dust lichen on one section of a stone wall but not another? Why do the gold and purple



lichens favor one gravestone, the pink, orange, and reds another, the pale greens the cemetery entrance wall? The answers are surely related to the chemistry and the surface textures of the rock they cover.

I look at rocks wherever I go.



**Pink, red, and sea-green lichens on rocks, Blackledge Falls**





**Smooth Rock Tripe (*Umbilicaria mammulata*), with Rockshield (*Xanthoparmelia* sp.) and mosses  
Split Rock, Gay City**

Rock Tripe is a foliose lichen often found on steep rock faces. I find it on the nearly vertical faces at the back of the Gay City Split Rock.



**Gay City Split Rock**



## LOOKING UP

On a bright, still afternoon, the still-dormant twigs and buds of deciduous trees are outlined against the sky. The White Ash has long, stout twigs with a sparse, opposite branching pattern.



White Ash (*Fraxinus americana*), Townsend Road, February 4



And here's its diamond-patterned reticulated bark:



**White Ash bark, with lichens**



Like the Ashes, Maples have opposite-branching twigs, but they're much thinner and more closely spaced than those of the ash trees:



**Sugar Maple (*Acer saccharum*) branch with twigs**

**Red Maple (*Acer rubrum*) branch**

Dogwoods also have opposite branching. The only other tree we have in Connecticut with opposite branches is the Horsechestnut. (Are there any Horsechestnuts in Andover?)



**Dogwood (*Cornus florida*) twigs with a clear opposite branching pattern**



All our other deciduous trees have alternate branching patterns, like Shagbark Hickory:



**Shagbark Hickory (*Carya ovata*) twigs and branches**

The naked Shagbark twigs zigzag every which way. They look crazed, but there must be a biological method to their madness, to ensure that in the summer, the compound leaves will be arrayed to maximize photosynthesis.

And here's the magnificent shaggy bark of the hickory, with its random-looking splits. It's as different from the geometric ash bark as it can be!





**Shagbark Hickory bark and twigs, Townsend Road, February 4**



Black cherry trees also have witchy twigs, but they're thinner and more numerous than those of the hickories.



**Black Cherry (*Prunus serotina*), Townsend Road, February 4**



**Black Cherry Bark**

Black cherry bark is often described as looking like burnt potato chips.



The sun was lowering as I walked between 3:30 and 4:30 p.m. on February 4. The last good picture I got was of this young sassafras tree, a lovely silhouette of harmonious curving lines.



**Sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*), Townsend Road, February 4**



## LOOKING FORWARD

On January 1, I saw the green tips of Skunk Cabbage spathes beginning to emerge in the intermittent stream behind the house.



**Skunk Cabbage spathe tip, small and green, January 1**

The spathe is a specialized leaf (a bract) that covers the fleshy flower spike – the spadix -- of the Skunk Cabbage,



Three weeks later, there was a fully formed spathe in the stream.



**Skunk Cabbage Spathe, January 22 – beautifully mottled in red and yellow.**



The next week, I found one in a place where I could inspect the spadix inside the spathe:



**Skunk Cabbage spadix (flower head) inside the spathe, January 30**

The inflorescence is not open yet, which is just as well, as there are no pollinators about. I will keep an eye on these as they develop.

Male wild turkeys are beginning to display. I saw one in the snow today, but it was too far away for a good portrait.

Now that we're past Groundhog Day, winter's days are numbered. The sun is getting stronger, the days longer. In a couple of weeks, the sap will begin to rise. The next sign of spring might be sap buckets on the trees!

Stay warm, stay well, enjoy the lengthening days.