

ALONG THE HOUSATONIC

By Morgan Bulkeley

WITHIN TWO MILES of Park Square it is surprising how much wild life may be found along the banks of the Housatonic River, polluted as it is. The flood plain, by keeping back housing a little, has maintained a branching green belt that embraces the very heart of the city.

Promising steps have been taken to upgrade the river, but so far not much has been done to acquire or preserve this natural sanctuary that exists in our very midst. It is a green, riparian walkway that could enhance the quality of an expanding city's future. It could be a revivifying, recreational artery; or it could be filled and clogged with housing and paved out of existence.

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A RECENT WALK along these snowy banks a mile below the east-west forks was a revelation. From within the broad band of woodland few houses were visible. It was a white woodland world reserved for small creatures, furred and feathered. By their floundering tracks in the knee-deep powder they showed their difficulties with it. For easier going, squirrels had established runways in straight lines, tree to tree. Rabbit channels rayed out from brier-patch holes. Even such light creatures as mice preferred to reuse a track from one clump of poverty grass to another.

The river had melted the falling snow, then frozen over solidly creating a sinuous, broad, paved main street much to the delight of the foxes. Every plodding fox track ended in a glissade down the

steep bank to the dance floor below. A light sugaring of snow showed the fox-trot, upriver and down, with all manner of flourishes.

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ALONG THE river bank in woodland glade or open swale, thrust up through the snow, were all sorts of seed and weed stalks, varieties to feed any bird or test any botanist. Most prevalent but barely surmounting the snow were the stiff, fruiting plumes of ostrich fern. Many a brushy tangle was festooned with the dried, prickly pods or Japanese lanterns of the wild cucumber rattling in the breeze. As prickly but smaller were the burrs of a few beach clotburs that had somehow worked their way this far upstream and away from their more favorite salt water. On one sunny point jutting into the river stood ten- and twelve-foot stalks of the giant wild sunflower; one marveled at how a plant could build such a tower in a single season.

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WHERE SILVER MAPLES arched the river, our attention was drawn by the flight of a pileated woodpecker to an unusual clump of those trees of pendulous branch and slender, upcurved withes. A dozen good-sized trunks splayed out from one central root creating a tree complex 15 long paces around. A little further downstream in another gathering of silver-maple giants, that surely must be the largest in the county, there arose a mammoth maple 17 feet 6 inches in girth at the smallest point above ground before it divided into two ample trunks, one 13 feet 4 inches and the other 9 feet 9 inches in circumference at breast height.

In this snow-filled, columnar cathedral we were startled by the who-eek? who-eek! of a wood duck that sprang up from the one small surface that a riffle of river had kept open through the long January

cold spell that dropped temperatures to 20 below zero. Many ducks are expected winterers, but not this liveliest of all waterfowl, long known as the summer duck. There are only two other January records for Berkshire County.

A week later the bird was still there, a handsome drake in full, multi-colored regalia shaming the gray waters with iridescent feathers as varied as trout flies on a felt hat.

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BEING CONCERNED about his diet in all that snow and ice and pollution, we searched the books for his customary fare, which is 90 per cent vegetation ranging in winter from small seeds up to acorns swallowed whole. Sure enough, on the bank beside the riffle was one of his staples, a white ash tree waving plenty of winged seeds to be translated into the gay plumes and jeweled eyes of spring.

Giants and gems, marvels and surprises were in our midst -- but for how long in the future?