



News from Nature

By Chad Steele, Park Manager, Bluebird Farm Park

### **Birds and Berries Make an Interesting Winter Walk**

Cabin Fever got you down? On the next sunny winter day come out to Carroll Community Park or the Bluebird Farm Park and see that winter is losing its grip on the area and spring is winning!

When walking the roads and trails watch for robins. Most robins migrate but there are many that stay all year. We don't usually notice them unless there is a winterberry holly growing in the area. The robin is very secretive in winter. It doesn't sing and sticks to wooded areas where there are plenty of multi-flora rose bushes that offer both fruit (rose hips) and cover to escape from the sharp shinned and cooper's hawks that would like to make a meal of robin.

The above-mentioned deciduous holly, (botanical name is *Ilex verticillata*) is a multi-stemmed shrub native to wetland areas but rare to find growing wild in our area. It resembles forsythia in growth habit and pretty much looks like any other leafy green shrub during the summer. It does however, have a secret during the summer that won't be revealed until October and lasts through winter until the next spring.

You see, being a holly it has fruits that are bright red, and during the summer those fruits are green and hidden by the leaves. Then, in fall the leaves turn color, and unlike evergreen hollies, they fall off, and all that remains are the beautiful bright red fruits! After the snow is on the ground they become beacons in the landscape. A 5-year old and up, un-pruned plant, can stop traffic. If you chose to purchase this plant keep in mind these few quirks:

1. ONLY female plants produce fruit so you will also need a male plant. Plant the male anywhere you like, as insects will carry the male's pollen to the female. The ratio of males to females is 1 male to every 8 to 10 females. (For example, if you purchase 3 females you only need 1 male plant.)
2. Pruning or shearing these plants can be done but they will never look appealing. It's best to put them in an area that they can grow uninhibited. Figure at least a space of 10' x 10' for each mature plant. Grow the female as a specimen plant in the landscape, where you would put a dogwood tree or tree hydrangea.
3. Water it A LOT the first year. Remember it grows wild in wetland areas but it does equally well in landscapes IF it has extra water while putting out new roots the first year you plant it. After that they don't need much help unless we have a drought.
4. Plants in full sun have the most fruits. Less sun means less fruit for the winter robins.
5. Deer and rabbits will eat the entire plant during the winter. Spray with repellants or fence it in for the winter.

Other birds that are attracted to this shrub include bluebirds, cedar waxwing, and mockingbirds.

Check out the patch of winterberries at Bluebird Farm Park. They are located at the upper gate/scenic trail entrance of the upper parking lot. Hurry though, the resident robins and bluebirds are feasting on them. Look for more of these plants in the future in key areas of the parks.

Park Manager, Chad Steele