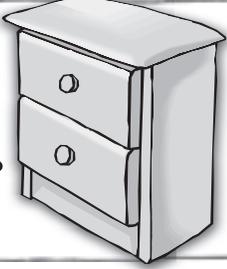


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## Andover Naturally: Great Outdoors Gifts

### Special events in the night sky in December

Lee Carvalho, for the *Beacon*

Well, it's December, and you know what that means: impossibly short days, Orion in the night sky, falling temperatures, low sun, school vacation, and holiday gatherings with too much food. Here are some ideas to help you through the season.

It's time to feed the birds, so look for the feeders you took down in the spring. "Traditionally, it's safe to put them out after Thanksgiving and bring them in around April 1 when the snow is gone," says bear expert Ben Kilham.

Larger animals, like bears, have entered torpor now to conserve energy, so they won't be attracted to your feeder. This is also the time of year when birds who are still active need the most help. If anybody on your holiday shopping list doesn't already own a bird feeder, what a great present that would make — along with a bag of seed.

The night sky in winter seems particularly bright, so try bundling up and going for a short walk at dawn or in the evening. The comet Catalina may be bright enough to be seen with binoculars as it rises higher each day in the early-morning December skies.

If dawn doesn't suit you, there is a celestial event worth seeing in the evening. Experts argue that the December Geminid meteor shower surpasses the August Perseids in both brilliance and reliability. On the evenings of Sunday and Monday, December 13 and 14, the crescent moon will set early enough that the dark sky should provide perfect conditions for viewing the shooting stars — perhaps as many as 120 per hour! A good pair of binoculars makes a great holiday present that will bring a lifetime of pleasure.

If you need to find a present for somebody who loves the outdoors, consider treating that person to a membership in the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC). This venerable organization, founded in 1876, constructed its first hiking trail in Tuckerman Ravine in 1879 and continues to build and maintain trails and huts today.

With membership comes their magazine, *AMC Outdoors*; information about over 8,000 activities every year; and a discount on hut fees, gear, books, and maps. The membership rate is \$50 for an individual, and if you are old enough (over 69) or young enough (under 30), the cost drops to \$25.

A great gift for anybody who walks outside in the winter in New Hampshire is a pair of microspikes. This lightweight, pocket-sized, durable traction system makes it possible to walk on any surface — ice, packed snow, wet rocks — with confidence. They are easy to put on over any shoe or boot and work like a mini-crampon. You can find them at places like EMS or REI; I bought mine at Huberts in New London.

If you know someone who likes to hunt or fish, you might consider a gift certificate from New Hampshire Fish and Game. Those certificates may be used toward the purchase of a fishing or hunting license or any merchandise at Fish and Game Headquarters at 11 Hazen Drive, Concord. Buy certificates at their headquarters, online, or by phone using a credit card at 271-3422.

The short days of December mean longer nights, and that means plenty of time to read. Here are some suggestions for books that might be perfect for you or somebody on your list:

*Good Morning Loon* by Elizabeth Varnai. This delightful book, illustrated with Kate Hartley's watercolors, was the 2014 winner of the National Outdoor Book Award in the children's category. Told through the boy's eyes, a mom and son enjoy an early morning canoe trip and spot frogs, beavers, mergansers, and a loon. It's a great bedtime story for children aged four to eight.

*Nature Anatomy: The Curious Parts and Pieces of the Natural World*, written and illustrated by Julia Rothman. This book for all ages has whimsical yet accurate drawings revealing the diverse curiosities and beauty of the natural world: bird nests, the life cycle of a mushroom, mountain formation, ecosystem of a rotting log, and the anatomy of a jellyfish. I bought this for my grandsons but haven't been able to part with it yet.

*Grandma Gatewood's Walk: The Inspiring Story of the Woman Who Saved the Appalachian Trail* by Ben Montgomery. Emma Gatewood was the first woman to hike the Appalachian Trail (AT), and she did that in 1955 when she was 67 years old! Gateway wore Ked sneakers and carried an army blanket, a raincoat, and a plastic shower curtain in a homemade denim bag slung over one shoulder. She was also the first person to hike the AT twice, and then she did it one more time! I haven't read this book yet, but it's in my stack of reading for this winter.

Please send your questions, observations, and photos to me at [AndoverNaturally@gmail.com](mailto:AndoverNaturally@gmail.com).