

DOWNNS PARK NATURE NOTES

BRAVING THE COLD



Ground pine in winter



Skunk cabbage in spring

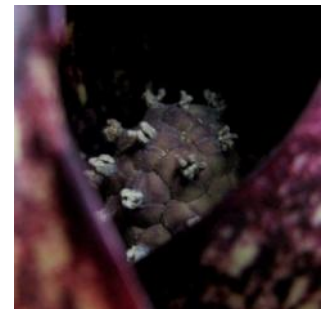
Winter visitors to the park are often rewarded with the sight of green islands on the forest floor. On first glance, the little shoots with finely cut leaves appear to be miniature pine trees. Some are even topped by what seem to be pine “candles.”

Actually, these are clubmosses, not young trees, and they won’t get any taller than five or six inches. The light-colored “candles” are the spring stems of our more common clubmoss, *Lycopodium obscurum*, also known as ground pine. The powdery spores are released in November and December.

Another plant that stands out is skunk cabbage, which should begin blooming in late January – making it the year’s first wildflower.

Skunk cabbage is a real character, chiefly because:

- It stinks. A broken or crushed leaf will tell you why it has that name.
- It braves the cold. Snow and ice don’t matter because it generates its own heat.
- It produces a flower head that looks something like an egg from outer space. The thing is nestled inside the dark spathe (right).
- It transforms itself. It starts out dark and pointy and ... well, strange looking. But as the weeks go by, it unfurls large, bright green leaves whose beauty alone will surely melt any remaining snow. Skunk cabbage leaves resemble garden-variety cabbage leaves but are not edible.



A good place to spot the skunks in the spring is from the causeway between Mileposts 2.3 and 2.4 on the Perimeter Trail.

You can see these and other native plants on a nature hike scheduled for February 15. Call the Information Center in early February for details and to sign up.

– Dave Cohn, naturalist volunteer