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LIVING

*If Candlemas Day be fair and bright,
Winter will have another flight.
If Candlemas Day be cloud and rain,
Then winter will not come again.*

An old English proverb

February begins with Candlemas, or Groundhog Day, a time we amuse ourselves with stories of a sleepy-eyed rodent emerging from its hole to gauge the prospects of spring. Although we cannot take the story literally, Groundhog Day does mark the mid-point of winter and, in earlier days, it was a time to take stock that you had half your hay, root crop and firewood left in order to comfortably make it to spring. This is maybe the best month to enjoy winter. Sunset is not until 5:30 p.m. or later, which allows for long afternoons to spend outdoors. Snow cover is more substantial as well. For some, there is the romance of the "big winter storm." It starts with an atmosphere of anticipation and the prospect of real excitement. There is the exhilaration of being out in the wind and snow and, afterwards, a spirit of camaraderie as friends and neighbours help each other dig out.

But winter can begin to weigh heavy on our psyche this month. At first glance, spring doesn't appear to be coming any time soon. Yet no matter how well-entrenched snow and ice may seem, February is indeed the "gateway to the year," and the promise of spring does begin to reveal itself this month. Forget what the calendar is saying and simply look, listen and smell. Already, there is a very noticeable stretch in daylight, American crows and horned larks are returning, and the first real birdsong since last summer can be heard. Starlings are whistling and cackling, chickadees are singing their "fee-bee" song and even cardinals are calling once again, caught up in the urge to reaffirm their pair bonds. Our noses, too, are alerted to the coming change of season, often by the smell of a skunk out searching for a mate on a damp February night. And, in only a few more weeks, red-winged blackbirds will have returned to local marshes and the first pussy willow catkins and wild leeks will have emerged.

The events listed below are typical of February in the Kawarthas. However, many of these happenings occur over the entire month and are therefore not limited to any specific date. The box in front of each entry may be used to check off those events that you witness yourself.

☐ 1 - Days are now as long as in October. More than an hour has been gained since Dec. 21. Daylight is with us until almost 6 p.m.

☐ 2 - Groundhog Day, Feb. 2, marks the mid-point of winter. However, don't waste your time looking for groundhogs. No sane woodchuck is out of hibernation yet, and the last thought in their mid-winter dreams is whether the February sky is clear or cloudy.

☐ 3 - Horned larks return. They are traditionally the first migrant arrivals of the year, and mark the coming of "pre-spring." Along with snow buntings, these are birds of open, agricultural land. Watch for them on fence posts, too.

☐ 4 - Ravens begin their aerial nuptial displays, diving and twisting like corkscrews over Shield country.

☐ 5 - Leo, the constellation of spring, holds sway over the early-morning sky as we head for work. Its promise of spring somehow makes the cold and darkness easier to endure.

☐ 6 - Grey squirrels mate in February and can often be seen streaming by in treetop chases.

☐ 7 - Young American beech trees retain many of their tan, papery leaves for the entire winter.

☐ 8 - Also known as ling or freshwater cod, burbot spawn under the ice on rocky lake bottoms.

☐ 9 - Barred owls sometimes leave their breeding territory during the winter and may even turn up in city parks and woodlots.

☐ 10 - Male common goldeneyes intensify their courtship behaviour, bobbing their heads and whistling loudly.



Karl Egnessy, special to The Examiner
Clockwise, from top: a horned lark, traditionally among the first migrant arrivals of the year; goldeneyes intensify their courtship behaviour in February, bobbing their heads and whistling loudly; and a male house finch. House finches begin singing again in February, as another breeding season approaches.

☐ 11 - Look for river otters in winter around areas of flowing water such as streams and rivers.

☐ 12 - On mild, sunny days, check the snow around the base of large trees for snow fleas. What looks like spilled pepper may begin to jump around right before your eyes!

☐ 13 - Wingless scorpion-flies and winter crane flies can often be found walking on the snow on cloudy winter days with mild temperatures. The latter is very slow moving, has long-legs and is amazingly spider-like in appearance.

☐ 14 - It somehow seems appropriate that Valentine's Day coincides with the return of birdsong and avian love. In fact, the chickadee's three-note whistle is often represented as "Hi Sweetie".

☐ 15 - Other species, too, are renewing pair bonds and adding bird song, rather tentatively at first, to our morning walks. Listen for white-breasted nuthatches, brown creepers, mourning doves, European starlings, northern cardinals, house finches and purple finches. Mild, sunny mornings are the best time to hear all of these birds.

☐ 16 - Male striped skunks roll out of their dens any time from mid-February to early March and go on a long prowl looking for females with which to mate. The smell of a skunk on a damp, late winter night is a time-honoured sign of spring and one of the first "datable" natural events of the new year.

☐ 17 - On mild winter days when suffi-

cient moisture is available, lichens are able to carry out photosynthesis and to actually grow.

☐ 18 - Several species of shrubs still have fruit "on the vine," even in mid-winter. These include highbush-cranberry and staghorn sumac. Because the fat content of these fruits is quite low, they are seldom eaten by birds or squirrels until all other food sources fail.

☐ 19 - All winter long, the Orion constellation dominates the southwestern sky.

☐ 20 - Late winter and early spring are the best times to see "earthshine," the faint lighting of the dark, left side of the moon during the waxing crescent phase. Watch the western sky just after sunset tonight, tomorrow and Thursday.

☐ 21 - Venus is putting on a wonderful show each evening, too. Viewed in the western twilight, this planet appears dazzlingly bright, even to the unaided eye. It will slowly rise higher each evening and grow in prominence throughout the winter and on into the spring.

☐ 22 - In late February and through much of March, stoneflies emerge from creeks and rivers, and hundreds can sometimes be seen crawling on the adjacent snow.

☐ 23 - Crow numbers increase as returning migrants bolster the ranks of those birds that never left. Watch for long, scattered flocks often flying at high altitudes.

☐ 24 - Abnormally warm weather conditions in the last week of February will bring

in robins as well as blackbirds and waterfowl. This is happening more often now as a result of climate change.

☐ 25 - Common goldeneye and common merganser numbers grow on the Otonabee River and Lake Katchewanooka as migrants from the Great Lakes begin to head north.

☐ 26 - Wolves mate between now and the middle of March. Each mated pair can produce up to six pups. The wolves we have in the Kawarthas are now believed to be a distinct species, known as eastern wolves. They are a smaller, more coyote-like animal than the grey (timber) wolf. Behind the ears, there is a slight reddish colour which is thought to be a result of their red wolf ancestry.

☐ 27 - Our local pair of bald eagles on Lake Katchewanooka were sitting on their nest by this date last year and had presumably already laid an egg. After their nest was blown down in a wind storm last July, the birds began to build a new nest this January in a live white pine, just to the south of the former nest.

☐ 28 - Sunset does not occur until 6:02 p.m., and evening twilight will carry on until 6:30. The day is already an hour longer than at the beginning of the month. The increase in daylight rekindles the human spirit!

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