

EDITOR: ROB McCORMICK
745-4641 ext. 244
fax 743-4581
life@peterboroughexaminer.com

LIVING

A month with no rules

March is a time of waiting — waiting for spring-to-be. Our patience, however, is starting to wear thin. Whenever we think that winter is finally ready to give



OUR CHANGING SEASONS
Drew Monkman

up her reign, we are hit by yet another blast of cold and snow. March is essentially a tug-of-war between winter and spring. And anything and everything goes — wind, snow, frigid cold, freezing rain, thundershowers and sometimes, near-summer warmth, for this seems a month without rules.

March rarely flaunts the signs of spring. Yet, despite what the day-to-day weather may be doing, many indications of the impending change of season simply can't be missed. The sun now is higher, brighter and warmer; we have daylight from 6 a.m. until early evening; Leo, the constellation of spring, looms high in the southeast; the daytime sky is full of noisy flocks of crows; and local wetlands are brightened by pussy willow buds as they reveal their insulating tufts of white hairs. The first true spring migrants are only a mild spell away, too, since a period of warm weather will bring in a flood of ducks and at least half a dozen species of songbirds.

March is also the only time of year that spotting a robin generates real excitement. An irksome question arises, however. Is the bird a true migrant or simply an individual that never left? The situation is especially complicated in Peterborough, where large numbers of robins overwinter every year. Still, migrant or not, an early March robin is always a welcome sight.

Our sense of smell, too, is reawakened this month by the pervasive odour of the thawing earth. Our ears are reacquainted with bird song as red-winged blackbirds, American robins and a dozen other migrants once again advertise ownership of nesting territories. All our senses tell us that the warmth and intense activity of "high spring" are coming. But let's not rush the season. Each stage of spring's arrival needs to be savoured, because it will be over all too soon.

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

□ 1 — Exceptionally warm weather may result in short-distance migrants like robins and red-winged blackbirds arriving back in the Kawarthas ahead of schedule.

□ 2 — Watch for red squirrels chasing each other through the tree tops. The male is usually the one doing the chasing in this season of squirrel romance.

□ 3 — Soon after sunset today, the rising full moon will undergo a total eclipse as the Earth's shadow falls upon it. Because some of the sunlight that strikes our Earth is

Check off events you see in March almanac



Clockwise, from top: A spring melt; a male northern pintail duck, a male wood duck and a male hooded merganser.

diffused and scattered by our atmosphere, its shadow is not completely dark. Sufficient light reaches the moon to give it an eerie, coppery glow, even when it's totally eclipsed.

□ 4 — Bufflehead duck numbers increase on the Otonabee River, and the first hooded mergansers usually appear.

□ 5 — Our noses are the first to notice changes in balsam poplar. On warm days, you can sometimes smell the familiar fragrance of the resin-like gum that coats the buds. This softening will allow the bud scales to open later in the spring.

□ 6 — The March winds spread pollen from the male cones of white cedar. These same winds also disperse the winged seeds of birch trees.

□ 7 — Male muskrats range far and wide looking for love. Males will attempt to mate with as many females as they can find, often resulting in vicious fights with other males. Dead muskrats are a familiar sight on roads in the spring, when their wanderings bring them into the path of automobiles.

□ 8 — March is also the mating season for other mammal species with a short gestation period. Among these are striped skunks,

groundhogs, eastern cottontails, snowshoe hares, European hares, red squirrels and both northern and southern flying squirrels.

□ 9 — Male crows give courtship displays which include fluffing up their body feathers, bowing repeatedly and singing softly.

□ 10 — The furry catkins of pussy willows and aspens poke through bud scales and become a time-honoured sign of spring.

□ 11 — Pairs of red-tailed hawks begin soaring together over their woodlot territories.

□ 12 — This is usually the best time of the year to listen for owls. As many as four or five species can sometimes be heard. Later in the month, you may also hear the first ruffed grouse, common snipe and American woodcock.

□ 13 — Dark objects such as fallen leaves and tree trunks absorb sunlight and transform it into heat. This heat melts the surrounding snow, allowing the object to sink down. Since debris which has accumulated in the snow over the course of the winter is usually dark, it also absorbs heat. This in turn helps to melt snow around the debris.

□ 14 — Depending on the species, willows are now acquiring a deeper honey-bronze or wine-red

colour, while red-osier dogwoods are flushed with a more exuberant red. Colour changes are often reported in birch and aspens as well. These changes may result from sap rising in the plants.

□ 15 — Lilac, red maple, silver maple and red-berried elder buds swell this month and become quite noticeable.

□ 16 — Sugar maple trees are tapped around the middle of March. When the sap starts to run, red squirrels can sometimes be seen biting sugar maple twigs and branches. It turns out that they are actually harvesting maple syrup by starting a sap flow, waiting a day or so for the water in the sap to evaporate and then returning to eat the syrup.

□ 17 — A sugar bush can also be a great place to observe insect activity. Flowing maple sap can attract bees, ladybird beetles, tortoiseshell butterflies, March flies and noctuid moths. Snow fleas, looking like a powdering of black pepper in the snow, are often seen along sugar bush trails, too.

□ 18 — Walleye and northern pike begin staging near spawning areas. Movement to these areas is triggered in part by increased flow rates as a result of snowmelt in late winter and early spring.

□ 19 — The return of the first songbirds becomes quite noticeable by mid-month. Among the most anticipated are American robins, eastern bluebirds, eastern phoebes, red-winged blackbirds, eastern meadowlarks and song sparrows.

□ 20 — Bird song increases accordingly. If you don't already know the songs of these common birds, this is a great time to start learning them. A good bird song reference site to bookmark is <http://www.naturesongs.com/pass.html>

□ 21 — The spring equinox falls on or about March 21. For the next six months, we can enjoy days that are longer than nights. Both the moon and sun rise due east and set due west.

□ 22 — Open sections of local lakes and rivers are host to thousands of northward-bound ducks, impatiently awaiting the departure of the ice. Little Lake, Lake Katchewanooka and Gannon's Narrows are popular stopover points.

□ 23 — A meltwater pond often forms in the corn field just south of Mather's Corners and east of Hiawatha Line. The pond welcomes a variety of ducks such as mallards, northern pintails, American wigeon, blue-winged teal, black ducks and wood ducks.

□ 24 — Melting snow uses up heat from the surrounding air, making the air feel cooler than you would expect.

□ 25 — The signature constellation of spring is Leo. Ruling over the southeastern sky in the evening, it is one of the few constellations that actually looks like its namesake. No other season offers as many bright stars and constellations as spring. There are no fewer than 11 first magnitude stars visible.

□ 26 — The snow cover is usually gone by late March, but occasional snow flurries are still to be expected. When snow comes after the robins return, it is sometimes called "robin's winter".

□ 27 — Sandhill cranes return to the Kawarthas and can sometimes be heard calling at dawn and dusk and seen performing their courtship dance. It includes head bobbing, bowing and leaping into the air.

□ 28 — Wild leek leaves poking through patches of late-March snow are often the first sign of new herbaceous plant growth. Leeks do not flower, however, until early summer.

□ 29 — The first swarms of mating midges can be seen over conifers along lakes and rivers.

□ 30 — Small flocks of tree swallows, the first true insect eaters to return to the Kawarthas, can usually be seen flying low over the Otonabee River and Little Lake in the last few days of March.

□ 31 — If the weather has been exceptionally mild, the first frogs usually begin calling, turtles emerge from hibernation and eastern garter snakes become active.

Drew Monkman is a Peterborough teacher and author of *Nature's Year in the Kawarthas*. He can be reached at dmonkman1@cogeco.ca. Karl Egressy is a Guelph nature photographer. To see more of his work and to contact him, go to www.kegressy.com.