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LIVING

Songs of spring

Each month has its own natural identity and April is no exception. As much as anything, this time of year means the return of song. On an April morning, the chorus of robins, cardinals, mourning doves and crows can be so loud that you have to get up and close the bedroom window. All day long, forests resonate with the drumming of ruffed grouse and the courtship hammering of yellow-bellied sapsuckers. When evening comes, the nasal “beep” of the woodcock is



OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Drew Monkman

constantly repeated from damp fields and thickets until the bird suddenly launches itself into the air and begins its spectacular sky dance.

But song is not limited to only birds, for this is also a time of amphibian love as marshes, swamps and woodland ponds reverberate with the calls of countless frogs caught up in a frenzy to reproduce. Salamanders, too, join the fray as they venture over ice, rock and road to make their way back to ancestral breeding ponds. On our lakes, we hear yet another April music in the tinkling of black candle ice, the clamour of ice piling up in ridges, and the roar of waves rolling under the disintegrating surface.

Our noses recognize the season by the smell of the sodden, thawing earth and decaying leaves. And, for those of us old enough to remember, April will always be synonymous with the smell of grass fires.

New plant life, too, vies for our attention this month. The yellow flowers of coltsfoot push forth among roadside stones. Almost overnight, tree tops appear less open as dormant buds swell and begin to open. The flowers of willows, poplars, elms and alders stand out against the grey brown landscape and provide a foretaste of what is to come, because April is a time of great expectation. In only a few weeks, the explosive growth of flowers and leaves will totally transform the landscape.

The dates and occurrences listed below are typical of nature in the Kawarthas in April. Hopefully, they will inspire you to really pay attention this year to spring's unfolding. A large part of seeing is simply knowing what to expect. The box in front of each entry may be used to check off those events that you witness yourself.

□ 1 — In the evening, look for the beautiful yellow-orange star, *Arc-turus*, in the eastern sky. This time-honoured harbinger of spring is the brightest star in the constellation *Bootes* and one of the brightest stars of all.

□ 2 — Migrating waterfowl numbers usually peak on Little Lake, the Otonabee River, Lake Katchewanooka and open areas of Buckhorn Lake. Ring-necked ducks, buffleheads, mergansers, scaup and goldeneye dominate.



Clockwise, from top left: a blue-winged teal, tundra swan and fox sparrow.

Karl Egressy, special to The Examiner

□ 3 — Puddle ducks such as pintails, wood ducks and teal often congregate in flooded fields such as the meltwater pond that forms each year just south of Mather's Corners and east of Hiawatha Line. Sometimes tundra swans show up here as well.

□ 4 — April is a very busy time for feeders. Northward-bound tree sparrows and dark-eyed juncos move through the Kawarthas in large numbers. Watch also for the large, thrush-like fox sparrow. This is one of Ontario's most beautiful birds.

□ 5 — The red maple is perhaps the best named of all trees. The buds and twigs are red; when new leaves emerge they have a reddish tinge; the stems of the leaves are red; the fall colour is often a deep scarlet; and, right now, the very visible flowers are also red.

□ 6 — It's quite common in April for a half-crazed robin or cardinal to aggressively peck at or fly up against a window for days on end. Being very territorial birds, they instinctively attack other individuals of the same species — in this case, their reflections.

□ 7 — Early-nesting red-shouldered hawks have now returned to their territories in the forests of the northern Kawarthas. Watch and listen as they perform their noisy courtship flights consisting of diving and loud calling.

□ 8 — The yellow, dandelion-like flowers you see growing in roadside ditches in early April, sometimes before snowbanks have melted, are a non-native species known as coltsfoot. Later in the month, the white, fluffy seed heads also resemble those of dandelions.

□ 9 — Now is a good time to learn the songs of Peterborough's early spring birds, namely the chickadee, robin, cardinal, mourning dove, grackle, starling, house finch, and song sparrow. Then,

when the May migrants arrive, you'll recognize their voices as something different.

□ 10 — Close to 30 species of local birds are already nesting this month. Among these are the crow, red-tailed hawk, mourning dove, house finch, starling, Canada goose, killdeer, mallard, bald eagle, house sparrow, common grackle, robin, cardinal and blue jay.

□ 11 — Up until recently, there were usually several days in mid-April when thousands of migrating tree swallows could be seen flying over the Otonabee River and adjacent roads and fields. With the continent-wide decline in swallows, this phenomenon seems to have disappeared, at least for now.

□ 12 — April sees a new woodpecker arrive on the scene, namely the migratory yellow-bellied sapsucker. It loves to hammer on resonant surfaces such as street signs to advertise ownership of territory. Its drumming pattern is a distinctive, slow, irregular tapping, that is easily imitated.

□ 13 — Male alder catkins grow into long, hanging, caterpillar-like structures that shed puffs of bright yellow pollen when touched. Look for alders along shorelines and the margins of wetlands.

□ 14 — If the weather is mild, local wetlands should be alive about now with the clamorous calls of thousands of frogs. The first voice usually heard is that of the chorus frog, which sounds like someone running a thumb over the teeth of a comb. Within a few days, wood frogs and spring peepers add their voices to the symphony as well.

□ 15 — If you want to see salamanders, wait for a mild, rainy night in early to mid-April when the first frogs are calling. Drive slowly along back roads that pass through low woodlands with near-

by swampy areas or flooded ditches. You should be able to see both the yellow-spotted and blue-spotted salamanders making their way to breeding ponds.

□ 16 — When water temperatures reach 7 C, walleye begin to spawn. Along with white suckers, they can sometimes be seen spawning at night at Lock 19 in Peterborough or below the pedestrian bridge in Young's Point. Take along a strong-beamed flashlight.

□ 17 — Hepatica are usually the first woodland wildflowers to bloom in the spring. The flowers can be pink, white or bluish.

□ 18 — The ruby-crowned kinglet is a common but little-known April migrant. Smaller than a chickadee, this hyper-active grey bird has a distinctive white eye ring and a long, boisterous call.

□ 19 — On average, most local lakes are ice-free by this date. In recent years, however, the ice has been going out earlier.

□ 20 — Tonight is the full moon. A full moon always rises at sunset and sets at sunrise.

□ 21 — White-throated sparrows are passing through and are easily attracted to feeders if you put seed on the ground. Their high-pitched, whistled “Oh sweet Canada” song is a signature sound of the northern Kawarthas from late April through early July.

□ 22 — Elm trees are now in flower and look like they are covered with myriad brown raindrops. The small, wind-pollinated flowers are clustered in tassels.

□ 23 — The courtship flight of the American woodcock provides nightly entertainment in damp, open field habitats such as some of the fields near the Peterborough Airport. Listen for their nasal “peep” call which begins when it's almost dark.

□ 24 — The muffled drumming of the ruffed grouse is one of the

most characteristic sounds of April. The birds drum to advertise territorial claims.

□ 25 — Bloodroot joins the wildflower parade about now. Eight large white petals make it stand out, as do the large, deeply cut leaves. This plant grows in colonies.

□ 26 — The first flocks of “northern” Canada geese heading for James Bay pass over. They fly at higher altitudes and in much larger numbers than our local “giant” Canada goose. Most seem to pass over east of Peterborough.

□ 27 — Large, pregnant queen bumblebees set out to begin a family. They fly low to the ground in search of a hole or burrow to claim for a home. The female actually makes a small ball of grasses and mosses in which to deposit her eggs.

□ 28 — If you hear a snoring sound coming from the marsh, it's probably the call of the leopard frog. Sometimes its call is also compared to the sound of hands rubbing a wet balloon.

□ 29 — The first tropical migrants are arriving! Listen for the song of the northern waterthrush in swampy, forested areas. It's one of the easiest warbler songs to learn.

□ 30 — You can often see northward-bound loons flying over Peterborough early in the morning in late April. Sometimes, they even call in flight.

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