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LIVING

Groundhog's favourite farnas

Wildlife weather predictions popular; count on February to prove them wrong

With February comes Groundhog Day and some tongue-in-cheek speculation on what the rest of the winter has in store for us. This year, there seems to be every indication that the mild conditions – no doubt related to a changing climate – will continue.



Drew Monkman
OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Although almost no one takes the weather-forecasting myth about groundhogs seriously, some people still believe that the behaviour or physical changes in some plants and animals can alert us weeks or even months ahead of time about the weather of the coming season. In other words, that it will be early or late, abnormally warm or cold, or wet or dry. There is absolutely no proof that this occurs, however. What we see happening with plants and animals reflects changes that are genetically controlled (e.g., a snowshoe hare turning white in the fall) or a result of past weather conditions (e.g., a woodchuck's ears to shed their leaves early).

Still, we should remember that, compared to humans, some animals are definitely able to make better use of their five senses to detect changes in the environment that accompany weather phenomena that are about to occur. As an example, some birds can sense a drop in barometric pressure and therefore instinctively seek cover before a rainstorm. No long-term weather prediction ability has ever been demonstrated, however, be it a woolly bear caterpillar or a groundhog!

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.

• 1 - We begin the month with about 9 3/4 hours of daylight and end with 11, a gain of about 75 minutes. The lengthening days are most notable in the afternoon.

• 2 - Groundhog Day, Feb. 2, marks the mid-point of winter. However, our groundhogs won't see their shadows – or light of day, for that matter – until mid-March at the earliest. Groundhogs are still comfortably in deep hibernation inside their winter burrows. Their heartbeat has dropped from 100 beats per minute to only 15, and their body temperature has plummeted from 35°C to only 6°C.

• 3 - Tentative bird song returns in February as pair bonds are established or renewed. Black capped chickadees, northern cardinals, and house finches are some of the birds that usually start singing this month.



Wikimedia

The eastern wolf is smaller than the gray wolf and has a reddish-gray coat. Drew Monkman saw his first gray wolf in Algonquin Park last week. A February trip to the park is also a good chance to see a variety of winter birds.

• 4 - Average February snowfall in Peterborough is about 31 cm. The average daily maximum temperature is 2.2 C and average daily minimum is -11.8. It will be interesting to see if the temperature averages this month are anywhere near these figures. According to Bryan Walsh at Time Science (Time Magazine) there have been 48 high-temperature records set since 1996 in New York City's Central Park – and one just one record low!

• 5 - If you're looking for a mid-winter weekend get-away or just a day trip, why not consider Algonquin Park. It's only about a two-and-a-half hour drive from here. It's a good selection of pine siskins, common nuthatches, evening grosbeaks, and both red and white-winged crossbills. Many can be seen right on the pavement, eating grit from sanding operations. Gray jays can easily be seen (and hand-fed) along the Spruce Bog Trail and Openung Road. Remember to bring some peanuts or sunflower seeds with you. Although the visitors centre is only fully open on weekends, the doors are left unlocked during the week to allow access to the washrooms and a the observation deck where the feeders are located. The nearby town of Whitney is also worth

checking out for birds.

• 6 - Gray squirrels mate in January or February and can often be seen streaming by in treeps as a group of males chases a half-terrified female. Amazing acrobatics are usually part of the show.

• 7 - Watch for river otters in winter around areas of flowing water such as streams and rivers. Their tough like "snowslide" trails are sometimes seen on embankments or even flat ground.

• 8 - Being very social animals, northern flying squirrels sometimes join up in single-sex groups for warmth during the winter. They will often choose a tree cavity.

• 9 - Horned larks return. They are traditionally the first migrant arrivals of the year and mark the coming of "pre-spring"

• 10 - The grey, brittle remains of last summer's roadside wildflowers add interest to a winter walk. Watch especially for the cup-like "bird's nest" of Queen Anne's lace.

• 11 - Wolves mate between now through early April. Only the alpha male and female in the pack will reproduce, however. Last week, I was fortunate enough to see an eastern wolf in Algonquin Park – my first ever and a gorgeous animal. It ran across the road in front of the

car.

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

• 13 - The Virginia opossum, a marsupial that is native to the southeastern U.S., is extending its range northward into parts of the Kawarthas, probably as a result of factors such as climate change and the resulting milder winters. These mostly nocturnal animals are sometimes attracted to bird feeders in winter where they eat spilled seed.

• 14 - If somehow seems fitting that the period around Valentine's Day often coincides with the return of birdsong and avian love. The chickadee's three-note whistle is often represented as a Valentines appropriate "Hi Sweetie."

• 15 - The Otonabee River sometimes floods, even in mid-winter. Cold weather conditions supercool (reduce the temperature to below 0°C) turbulent water as it rushes downstream and over dams, thereby creating frazil ice. This type of ice is characterized by loose, needle-shaped ice crystals that resemble blue slush. Frazil ice has the ability to "stick" to the upstream side of objects in the water and grow in size as more ice gets deposit-

ed. This can create ice jams that impede the flow of the river and cause flooding.

• 16 - Lake trout eggs hatch in February but the fry remain in the substrate for about six weeks and survive on energy stored in their yolk sac. They swim up from the shoal where they hatched in late March and early April and must actively feed or starve to death. Food is usually abundant at that time. However, climate change may cause an increase in water temperature that would result in the eggs hatching earlier. The fry may then become active in mid-winter when there is no food available and consequently starve to death.

• 17 - The Great Backyard Bird Count (GBCC) begins today and will continue through next Monday. The GBCC engages bird watchers of all levels of expertise to create a real-time snapshot of the whereabouts and relative abundance of North American birds in mid-winter. Anyone can participate. Go to www.birdcount.org for details.

• 18 - True spiders may also emerge from the leaf litter and head out onto the snow pack on mild winter days. These are species that overwinter as adults and do not build webs to catch prey.

• 19 - Our sense of smell can

be useful in winter tree identification. Break a twig or crush a bud of yellow birch and a wintergreen or peppermint smell is released. An equally pleasant but much stronger smell comes from the large, terminal buds of the balsam poplar. Their familiar spicy fragrance immediately evokes the smell of damp, late May morning.

• 20 - Winter is on the ebb. The sun is rising and setting further and further north with each passing day. This makes for longer days.

• 21 - 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.

• 22 - This is courtship time for ravens. Males begin their aerial nuptial displays, diving and twisting like corkscrews over Canadian Shield country. Pairs of ravens will also soar together. There has been a dramatic southern expansion of the raven's range in recent years. They are often seen right over Peterborough.

• 23 - "Giant" Canada geese that have wintered along the Great Lakes and southwards into the northern and mid-United States begin arriving back in the Kawarthas. Other species such as the cackling goose (formerly thought to be a sub-species of the Canada goose) sometimes mix in with these flocks.

• 24 - Abnormally warm weather in the last week of February will bring in robins as well as blackbirds and waterfowl.

• 25 - The male common goldeneye puts on quite a show of courtship behaviour in late winter. He thrusts his head forward and then moves it back towards his rump with his bill pointing straight up in the air at which time he utters a squeaky call.

• 26 - February is often a good time to see "sun dogs." They consist of two sharp rainbow-like arcs forming on either side of the sun and creating a halo of light.

• 27 - Leo, the constellation of spring, holds sway over the early northeastern morning sky as we head for work.

• 28 - Sunset does not occur until 6 p.m., and evening twilight will carry on until 6:30. The days are almost an hour longer than at the beginning of the month!

• 29 - Spring has sprung for overwintering monarch butterflies in the mountains of Mexico. Now that the lengthening days have triggered the final development of their reproductive systems, male monarchs are zealously courting the females.

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