

## localnews

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## LIVING

# Early spring comes Marching

## Unusually warm winter has sap running sooner but threatens some species

The story of this non-winter has, of course, been the mild temperatures. However, we shouldn't be too surprised. The warmer than normal mean temperature trend has actually been the rule since last July. Although the more northerly location of the jet stream — which fences us off from cold Arctic air — is probably the main cause of the warm weather this winter, it is almost certainly set on a background of global warming. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Earth's current warming trend is proceeding at a rate that is unprecedented in at least the past 1,300 years, and the sharpest rise has occurred between 1975 and 2010.



In recent months, the extent to which Peterborough's monthly mean temperature (first number) has soared above the long term average (second number) is quite remarkable:

November 2011: 4.3 C vs. 1.7 C  
December 2011: -1.6 C vs. -5.3 C  
January 2012: -4.2 C vs. -8.9 C

Although the mild conditions and lack of snow have made life easier, there will be a price to be paid, especially if the trend continues in future years as it almost certainly will. One of the impacts will almost certainly be higher survival rates in species populations normally managed by freezing temperatures. Among these are many species of insects including parasites such as deer ticks. Deer, themselves, will probably continue to do well since milder winters make it easier to find food and to enjoy greater reproductive success. Exploding deer populations put pressure on fragile ecosystems, however.

### FROGS THREATENED

According to Carleton University hibernation expert, Ken Storey, there is also concern for frogs. In the Ottawa and Wharton areas, there have already been reports this winter of frogs calling for mates when they should be hibernating in the leaf litter under a cover of snow. Frogs that emerge early from hibernation find their insect food source is missing and have nothing to replenish precious energy stores. This means death from starvation or, for those that manage to survive, being overly thin and weak come the energy intensive spring and summer seasons. Frogs are able to go back into hibernation when a cold snap occurs but often the damage will have been done.

What follows is an Almanac of those events that are typical of an "average" March. However, in light of the mild weather, it will be interesting to see how much earlier these events actually occur this year.

1. We begin the month with about 11 hours of daylight and end with over 12 ½ — a gain of more than 90 minutes!

2. Check your gardens earlier than usual this month for the first crocuses. Some were already reported blossoming in late February in the Toronto area.

3. Breeding season has begun for raccoons. After about eight weeks, a litter of usually four babies will be born.

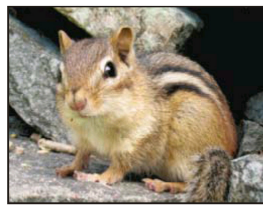
4. Bufflehead, goldeneye, and com-



Courtesy McLean Berry Farm



Courtesy McLean Berry Farm



Wikimedia

March is the time for maple sugaring and McLean Berry Farm is one of several local production centres preparing for an earlier than usual season. Another March returnee is the chipmunk, which will make its way above ground after hibernating for the winter.

mon merganser duck numbers are continuing to increase on Little Lake and the Otanabee River. The first hooded mergansers since last November usually appear, as well. The arrival of ring-necked ducks is not far behind.

5. Chipmunks are also making their first appearance above ground since late fall. They'd remain somewhat active over the winter, however, making repeated trips to their underground storehouses for food.

### COTTONTAILS BATTLE

6. Usually after dark but sometimes in the early morning twilight, mating pairs of eastern cottontails will square off in a manner reminiscent of highborn sheep. The two will run headlong at each other as if to butt heads. However, at the last instant, one animal will jump half a metre in the air while the other runs beneath it.

7. Starlings and house sparrows are laying claim to nest boxes, while common ravens are already busy incubating their eggs.

8. Honeybees, which remain active all winter thanks to their provisions of honey, grow restless as the weather warms up and fly outside of the hive more often.

9. For many of us, the characteristic smell of March comes from the production of maple syrup. It is a sweet aroma of evaporating sap, mixed with the smell of wood smoke wafting from the sugar shack. The familiar smell of

thawing earth and organic matter is usually everywhere by month's end, as well.

10. Flocks of bohemian waxwings, a species that breeds in northwestern Canada, can often be found in the Kawarths in late winter. Watch for the ruddy colour under the tail.

11. Daylight savings time begins today. Put your clocks ahead one hour.

12. The buds of lilac, red-berryed elder, red maple, and silver maple swell this month and become much more noticeable than earlier in the winter.

13. The furry catkins of pussy willow and aspens poke through bud scales and become a time-honoured sign of spring. Aspens, like willows, have hairy buds. However, aspen buds grow only from twigs on the upper branches of what is a much taller tree than the pussy willow.

14. Pairs of red-tailed hawks begin soaring together over their woodlot territories.

15. The first northward-bound turkey vultures are usually seen on about this date. Each year, small flocks of vultures roost in tall spruce trees in various locations in Peterborough and can be seen flying low over neighbourhood streets.

16-18. Most years, sugar maple trees are tapped around the middle of March. However, according to Erin McLean of McLean Berry Farm south of Buckhorn, small amounts of sap had already started running in mid-February but not

enough to start collecting. She believes that strong runs of sap will begin relatively soon — weather conditions permitting — and the trees are being tapped this week in order to be ready. Average daytime temperatures of about 5 C, combined with night-time temperatures of about -5 C create the best conditions for a strong sap run. Buckhorn Maplefest this year will be held the weekends of March 17 and 18, 24 and 25, and March 31 and April 1. Go to [www.mcleanberryfarm.com/](http://www.mcleanberryfarm.com/) for details.

### WATERFOWL WEEKEND

17. The very popular Presque Isle Waterfowl Weekend takes place March 17-18 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. You will be able to appreciate one of Ontario's great natural spectacles, namely the return of thousands of migrating waterfowl to their staging areas along the lower Great Lakes. Volunteers with spotting scopes are stationed at key areas to help visitors find and identify the waterfowl they see. Go to <http://www.friends-of-presque-ile.on.ca/> for more information.

18. The first songbirds have usually returned by mid-month. In the city, the most notable new arrivals are robins (many of which overwintered here this year) and grackles. Grackles are those foot-long, glossy purple-blackbirds that make a loud "chack" call as they fly around your neighbourhood in small groups.

19. The increase in bird song is

now very noticeable. If you don't already know the songs of the common city birds, this is a good time to start learning them. A great website to try is [www.birdjan.com/learn.php](http://www.birdjan.com/learn.php)

20. Today is the spring equinox. At 1:14 a.m. the sun will cross directly over the Earth's equator. It will rise at 7:15 a.m. and set at 7:27 p.m., giving a day length of 12 hours and 12 minutes. On this date, the tilt of Earth relative to the sun is zero.

21. Around the time of the full moon closest to the spring equinox, the moon rises later each subsequent night than on any other time of year. There is about an 80 minute difference in the time of moonrise between the evening of the full moon and the evening after. This is just the opposite of what happens at the full equinox when moon rise is only 25 minutes later from one night to the next.

22. Open sections of local lakes and rivers are host to thousands of northward-bound ducks, impatiently awaiting the departure of the ice. Expect the waterfowl spectacle to happen earlier than usual this year, however.

### FIRST BUTTERFLIES

23. On a warm day in late March, you may get a glimpse of a mourning cloak butterfly taking its first flight since last fall. These purple-black and yellow butterflies will often feed on sap dripping from maple trees in spring.

24. March is usually the best time of the year to hear a variety of different owls. Barred owls scream, his, hoot, and cackle from mixed forests on the Canadian Shield. Further south, great horned owls and eastern screech owls whinny from woodlots in mostly agricultural areas. Listen, too, for the single-note whistle of migratory saw-whet owls. It is repeated monotonously without any interruption.

25. No other season offers as many bright stars and constellations as spring. There are no less than 11 first magnitude stars visible. The season's signature constellation is Leo, which rules over the southeastern sky in the evening.

26. American tree sparrow numbers at our feeders increase as migrants from further south make their way northward. Some tree sparrows can usually be heard singing.

27. Sandhill cranes return to the Kawarths and can sometimes be heard calling at dawn and dusk and seen perching on trees. They also, at times, include head bobbing, bowing and leaping into the air.

28. By late March, field birds list to them for include eastern meadowlark, song sparrows and kinglets. Killdeer get their name from their calls of "kill-dee" or "kill-dee".

29. Coltsfoot, with its dandelion-like flowers, may bloom if the weather is warm enough. Watch for them along roadsides.

30. Wild leek leaves poking through patches of late March snow are often the first sign of new herbaceous plant growth.

31. If the weather has been exceptionally mild, the first spring peepers and chorus frogs may begin calling.

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