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### **Pair bonds and the return of bird song**

For most of us, winter is beginning to weigh heavy on the psyche by the time mid-February rolls around. At first glance, spring doesn't appear to be coming any time soon. However, forget what the calendar may be saying and even the snow and temperature, because spring is indeed revealing itself this month. Already, there is a very noticeable stretch in daylight, especially in the late afternoon. And, just as promising, bird song has once again returned. Starlings are cackling, cardinals are whistling and even the easily-ignored house sparrow is chirping once again with great enthusiasm. All of these species are caught up in the urge to either find a new mate or simply reaffirm the bonds that tie them to an existing one. This is the first step in the reproductive process that will soon lead to nesting, egg laying and a new generation of young.

As in humans, the duration of the relationship between male and female birds varies considerably, depending on the species. With long-lived birds such as geese, crows, and some owls, the same pair may remain together in a monogamous relationship for life. For other species, a pair may stay together for several successive breeding seasons (tree swallows, mourning doves), for one entire breeding season (most songbirds) or for a single nesting (house wrens). In some species, such as American robins, pairing arrangements seem to vary with individual birds.

Even with species that have a lifelong mate, the attachment weakens during the fall and early winter. The birds may be indifferent or even aggressive to each other during this time. By mid- to late winter however, a reaffirmation of the pair bond begins. This is especially apparent in cardinals. Although the male and female remain together throughout the year, the relationship between the birds is relaxed in the non-breeding season. Most cardinals join small flocks in the late fall and have little to do with their mate. But, starting in mid-February, both sexes begin to feed together and the male starts to sing regularly once again. Singing serves to reestablish the pair bond and, in the case of unmated individuals, to attract a new mate. Listen for the cardinal's loud, clear, ringing whistles of which there are many variations. Unlike most other species, the female cardinal also sings. She will sometimes answer the male by singing an exact match of his song. At times, the two birds will even sing in unison. The female's voice is somewhat softer, and, as a general rule, she does not sing as often as the male. If you have cardinals coming to your feeder, you should also watch for the male actually putting food into the female's beak, a behaviour known as courtship feeding.

White-breasted nuthatches and black-capped chickadees also have mating behaviours that are easy to observe. In response to lengthening daylight, the male nuthatch is becoming much more interested in the female with which he shares the same territory throughout the year. He sings in her presence, bows before her, flutters his wings, cocks his tail, and often brings her food. Male chickadees, too, are getting geared up for love as they begin to sing their familiar three note song. This high-pitched whistle is often described as sounding like "hi sweetie", an appropriate and easy-to-remember description, especially since the return of chickadee song usually coincides with Valentine's Day. Memory aids such as these are extremely helpful in remembering bird songs.

The strengthening of the pair bond is also evident in large birds these days. The first species of the year to begin breeding activity is the great horned owl. This common owl actually begins hooting in the late fall and continues to do so all winter. Some great horneds may remain paired all year long, although they tend to drift apart in the non-breeding season. The female sometimes answers the male's deep, resonant hoot with a shorter and higher-pitched hoot of her own. Great horneds lay their eggs in late February or early March. Biologists believe that early nesting allows the young owls to be ready to learn their hunting skills in late spring when prey is most plentiful.

You should also watch for the courtship performance of crows and ravens. The male crow, which is usually slightly larger than the female, fluffs up his body feathers, spreads his wings and tail and bows several times to the female. He will also sing to her a rattle-like song. Like the crow, ravens also mate for life and stay together throughout the year. However, there is still a courtship period every winter. The male and female can be seen soaring with wingtips nearly touching. The male may also perform aerial acrobatics, including a spectacular mid-air tumble. Ravens are a common species of northern Peterborough County.

Ducks, too, are involved in the courtship game right now. Goldeneyes are especially flamboyant in their behaviours and usually quite easy to observe. Several males will often display to a female at the same time, throwing their head back, pointing their bill up in the air and kicking the water in an effort to impress. All the while, they can be heard uttering a loud, whistling call. Try looking for these beautiful black and white ducks along the Otonabee River and, when the ice goes out, on Little Lake.

In a few weeks, red-tailed hawks will also be showing unique behaviours. The male and the female start to perch close together, often in the same tree. They may also soar close to each other in wide circles, sometimes almost touching. Most red-tails leave the Kawarthas in winter but begin returning by mid-March. A few remain all winter.

So, despite the salt stains, slush and frost-covered windshields, winter is indeed losing its grip. In only four or five more weeks, red-winged blackbirds will have returned to local marshes, robins will be singing and a whole new season will be upon us.

What to watch for this week

Leo, the constellation of spring, holds sway over the early morning sky as we prepare for work. Its promise of winter's end somehow makes the cold and darkness easier to endure.

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