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LIVING

Promise of spring

"Every gardener knows that under the cloak of winter lies a miracle ... a seed waiting to sprout, a bulb opening to the light, a bud straining to unfurl. And the anticipation nurtures our dream."

— Barbara Winkler



OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Drew Monkman

February, which derived its name from Februa, the Roman festival of purification, is the month in which the promise of spring begins to reveal itself.

There is a noticeable increase in daylight, a host of mammals including skunks and squirrels are mating, migrant horned larks return, bird song

begins once again, and, by month's end, great horned owls are often on their eggs. More than anything though, February is a time of anticipation for the true change of season that awaits us in only a few more weeks.

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 — Days are now as long as in October. More than an hour has been gained since Dec. 21. Daylight is with us until almost 6 p.m. p.m.

□ 2 — Groundhog Day, Feb. 2, marks the mid-point of winter. In weather lore, if a groundhog emerges from its burrow today and see its shadow, winter will last another six weeks. If the weather is cloudy and there is no shadow to be seen, winter will soon end. However, in the real world, no groundhog will be out of hibernation until at least mid-March.

□ 3 — Woodpeckers begin to drum more frequently and aggressively to advertise ownership of territory.

□ 4 — It's not uncommon to see "mice-like" creatures in winter, sometimes around the birdfeeder or scurrying away in the garage. To tell them apart, remember that mice have long tails and large ears; voles have very short tails and large ears; shrews have pointy noses and no visible ears; and moles have pink, fleshy tentacles on their snouts and huge front feet.

□ 5 — Bear cubs are born between mid-January and mid-February. They come into this world as hairless, sightless, and toothless bundles and only weigh about half a pound. The milk the mother provides, however, contains 33 per cent milkfat, which means, by April, the cubs will weigh five pounds. A human mother's milk contains only three per cent milkfat.

□ 6 — Gray squirrels mate in February and can often be seen streaming by in treetop chases as one or several males pursue a half-terrorized female. Red squirrels will join the mating parade at month's end.

□ 7 — Even though its still mid-winter, chickadees start whistling their three-note mating song as



Karl Egressy, special to The Examiner

Common mergansers, like the female above, are among the ducks usually present on the Otonabee River in late February as migrants from the Great Lakes begin to head north.

flocks break up and males establish breeding territories. An easy mnemonic for the chickadee's song is "Hi Sweetie." The song's arrival coincides nicely with Valentine's Day.

□ 8 — If you live in northern Peterborough County, watch for ravens performing courtship flights. They dive, soar and twist like corkscrews to impress their mate and reaffirm pair bonds.

□ 9 — Barred owls sometimes leave their breeding territory during the winter and may even turn up in city parks and woodlots. This year, at least one bird has been seen at Jackson Park and another in the cedar woodlot between Edmison Drive and the Parkway Trail.

□ 10 — Late winter and early spring are the best times to see "earthshine," the faint but eerie lighting of the dark, left side of the moon during the waxing crescent phase. The lighted part of the moon is only a thin sliver. Watch the western sky just after sunset tonight, tomorrow and Tuesday.

□ 11 — Bright stars abound in the winter sky. In fact, 17 of the 33 brightest stars visible in Canada are all clustered together right now in about one 10th of the sky. They belong to a group of constellations called the Winter Six, namely Orion, Gemini, Auriga, Taurus, Canis Major, and Canis Minor. They also contribute to the false impression that the night sky is actually clearer in winter and that stars somehow shine brighter than in other seasons.

□ 12 — On mild, sunny days in mid to late winter, check the snow around the base of large trees for snow fleas, also known as spring-tails. You would think someone had sprinkled the snow with pepper.

□ 13 — With tomorrow being Valentine's Day, it's an appropriate occasion to talk about hearts — the avian kind. A bird's heart is about 40 per cent larger than that of a similar-sized mammal. The larger size is necessary to provide maximum pumping action during long migratory flights.

□ 14 — Valentine's Day is also celebrated by skunks. Beginning in mid-February, males head out on nocturnal prowls as they look for females with which to mate. The smell of a skunk on a damp, late winter night is a time-honoured sign of spring and one of the first "datable" natural events of the new year.

□ 15 — Cardinals, too, are renewing pair bonds and adding much-appreciated song to our morning walks. The cardinal's song is a series of loud, clear, mostly slurred whistles. Mild, sunny mornings seem to inspire the most energetic singing.

□ 16 — Giant Canada Geese that have wintered along the Great Lakes and southwards begin to arrive back in the Kawarthas in late February most years.

□ 17 — Look for river otters in winter around areas of flowing water such as streams and rivers. County Road 46 between Havelock and Lasswade is a good place to see otters, or at least their tracks and snow slides.

□ 18 — Birders may want to keep an eye open for large stick nests in woodlots to see if they are occupied later in the winter and early spring by nesting great horned owls or red-tailed hawks.

□ 19 — If the snow and cold are getting you down, why not create a little winter greenery? Cut some stems from deciduous trees and shrubs like tamarack, alder, willow, or dogwood. Put the stems in a

vase of water in a window and within a week, leaves should begin to appear. It's a great way, too, to see how buds open and all that is packed inside.

□ 20 — Male common goldeneyes put on an entertaining courtship display as they bob their heads and whistle loudly. They often congregate just south of Lakefield on the Otonabee River and can be easily viewed from the side of the road.

□ 21 — For whatever reason, February seems to be a particularly good time to see "sun dogs." They consist of two short rainbow arcs appearing on either side of the sun, creating a halo of light. Sun dogs appear when the sun shines through a thin cloud of ice crystals, usually on days with feathery cirrus clouds.

□ 22 — Winter survival for browsing animals like deer and moose can become uncertain in February. If browsing has been heavy in an area, older twigs must be consumed. The older a twig is, the less food value it has. For example, an 18 month-old willow twig has only half the nutritive value of a six month-old twig. To compensate, the animals have to metabolize stored protein and fat, which causes a continual loss of weight.

□ 23 — Winter is on the ebb. The sun is rising and setting further and further north with each passing day. This means that it travels higher through the sky, making for longer days. Right now, the sun rises only 15 degrees south of due east and sets 15 degrees south of west. After March 21st, the vernal equinox, sunrise and sunset will occur north of east and west.

□ 24 — Abnormally warm weather conditions in the last week of February will bring in robins as well as blackbirds and waterfowl. This is happening more often now

as a result of climate change.

□ 25 — A drive along the Otonabee River between Trent University and Lakefield often makes for great duck-watching in late winter and early spring. Dozens of goldeneyes and mergansers are usually present by now as migrants from the Great Lakes begin to head north.

□ 26 — Check out the southeastern sky before sunrise this morning for a nice pairing of the planets Mercury and Venus. Mercury is the smaller of the two.

□ 27 — From late February through early March, flying squirrels give birth in tree cavities. We have two species in the Kawarthas, the northern and the southern flying squirrel.

□ 28 — Sunset does not occur until 6:02 p.m., and evening twilight will carry on until 6:30. The day is already an hour longer than at the beginning of the month. The increase in daylight rekindles the human spirit!

□ 29 — This is a leap year. As a general rule, February has 29 days when the year number is divisible by four. Without leap years, the calendar would end up being ahead of the actual seasons. This is because a year is actually 365 days and six hours. By adding an additional day every four years, we can better align the calendar with the seasons.

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