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LIVING

Winter's grip loosens

Like many of our months, March derives its name from a Roman god. In this case it was Mars, the god of war. For the Romans, however, it was not the third, but rather



OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Drew Monkman

the first month of the year. This made sense because March is a time of warm spring weather in the Mediterranean and therefore a logical point to begin the year. This was also the start of the military campaign season, hence the name's connection with war.

In the natural world, March is a time when winter's grip finally begins to loosen. Large numbers of migrants return, bird song greets us as we step outside in the morning, the buds of several tree species begin to open, and the longer days and warmer sun rekindle our spirits.

The events listed below are typical of March in the Kawarthas. Many of these happenings, of course, may occur over the entire month and are not restricted to any specific date. The box in front of each entry may be used to check off those events that you witness yourself.

□ 1 — Open sections of local lakes and rivers will be host to thousands of northward-bound ducks later this month. Little Lake, Lake Katchewanooka, Gannon's Narrows and the Otonabee River offer good viewing opportunities.

□ 2 — Red squirrels become aggressive toward their own kind as the mating season begins. Listen for the squirrels' scolding "cherr" call as feuding over territory becomes common. Several males at a time can sometimes be seen chasing a half-terrified female through the forest canopy.

□ 3 — With earlier sunrises, later sunsets, and the sun's higher path through the sky, we enjoy longer and usually warmer days. A good measure of winter's waning can also be seen in the circles of bare ground around tree trunks. Although sunlight reflects off snow, it is absorbed by dark tree bark and gently radiated back to the surrounding snow. Snow melt then occurs around the base of the tree.

□ 4 — House sparrows are already laying claim to nest boxes. The male house sparrow will often perch on the box and call repeatedly in order to show ownership and to attract a female.

□ 5 — This is mating season for the barred owl. Famous for their wide range of vocalizations, these highly vocal birds scream, hiss, hoot, and cackle the March and April nights away. Listen especially for a resounding "hoo, hoo, too-HOO; hoo, hoo, too-HOO, ooo." The easy to remember mnemonic is "Who, cooks, for-you? Who, cooks, for-you, all?"

□ 6 — After several months of respite from house flies, these pesky critters often reappear on windows in March. They are adults that have "slept" through the winter in a type of hibernation called diapause. Fly eggs that were laid in the fall may also be present, but they won't hatch until later in the spring.

An almanac for March, month of the vernal equinox



Clockwise, from top: a red-tailed hawk, barred owl and house finch.

□ 7 — Male raccoons lose interest in sleeping as breeding season begins. Watch for the meandering tracks of males in the snow and mud as they search out receptive females. They may also visit your yard in search of food. They are known to enjoy bird seed!

□ 8 — The very popular Presqu'île Provincial Park Waterfowl Festival takes place the weekends of March 8 and 9 and March 15 and 16. The park is located near Brighton, about an hour's drive south of Peterborough. Viewing stations are set up where knowledgeable volunteers equipped with spotting scopes, field guides and endless enthusiasm point out the different species of waterfowl and their courtship displays. Up to 10,000 birds of as many as 25 different species are usually present in the waters off the park. You can expect to see large numbers of canvasbacks, long-tailed ducks, redheads, ring-necked ducks and, especially, greater scaups.

□ 9 — Bird song is now very noticeable. Listen especially for the cardinal and house finch. The latter sings a high-pitched, disjointed, warbled song, often from the top of a tall conifer.

□ 10 — The furry catkins of pussy willows are a time-honoured sign of spring. Catkins are actually clusters of tiny flowers densely covered

with silky white hairs when immature. Catkin is a Dutch word meaning "little kitten."

□ 11 — Red-tailed hawks are making their way back from wintering grounds in the United States. Watch for pairs of these birds soaring together over their woodlot territories.

□ 12 — This is usually the best time of the year to listen for owls. In the southern Kawarthas, great horned and screech owls can be heard, while the northern Kawarthas is home to the barred owl.

□ 13 — Chipmunks reappear in our yards. Although we haven't seen them since November, they were not sleeping all the time. Because chipmunks don't have enough body fat to keep themselves alive for many months, they need to arise occasionally during winter to snack from underground food caches and to go to the bathroom.

□ 14 — This is one time of year when dandelions are actually a welcome sight. Even though there may still be lots of snow on the lawn, snowmelt usually occurs along the bottom of southward facing walls. Here, the first green grass appears and, often, the first dandelions bloom as well. Even though we battle this alien species later in the season, right now it's a much-appreciated sign of spring.

□ 15 — The buds of a number of trees look different this month as they swell and stand out clearly against the blue spring sky. The buds of red maple, silver maple, and trembling aspen (a cousin of the pussy willow) are among the most noticeable.

□ 16 — Sugar maple trees are tapped around the middle of March. Daytime temperatures above 5C combined with nights below freezing create the best conditions for a good sap run.

□ 17 — Today is St. Patrick's Day. This Irish saint is said to have ridden Ireland of snakes. It's unfortunate that western tradition sees these reptiles as creatures of ill-repute. Many Ontario species are extremely rare or even threatened with extinction. On St. Patrick's Day, Ontario's snakes are still down below the frost line in hibernaculae such as crevices, wells, and rodent burrows.

□ 18 — The first songbirds have usually returned by mid-month. In the city, the most commonly seen species are robins 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. They are easily distinguished from starlings by their long, wedge-shaped tail.

□ 19 — Flocks of red-winged black-

birds are now returning to the still-frozen wetlands of the Kawarthas. These early arrivals typically perch in the highest branches of trees and are easy to see. Some flocks venture into the city and may even turn up at feeders.

□ 20 — Today is the vernal equinox and the first day of spring. For the next six months, we can enjoy days that are longer than nights. Both the moon and sun rise due east and set due west today.

□ 21 — Starting at about 7:30 p.m., watch the eastern horizon for Arcturus, the brightest star of summer, and the harbinger of spring. To find this beautiful star, follow the arc of the Big Dipper's handle to the next brightest star. Mariners used to say: "Arc to Arcturus."

□ 22 — 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. The mourning cloak overwinters in the adult stage of the life cycle.

□ 23 — A meltwater pond often forms in the corn field just south of Mather's Corners and east of Hiawatha Line. The pond welcomes a variety of ducks such as mallards, northern pintails, American wigeon, blue-winged teal, black ducks and wood ducks.

□ 24 — If the weather becomes particularly warm, you may see the odd honey bee on a crocus or snowdrop in your garden. Honeybees are one of the few insects that remain active all winter.

□ 25 — The signature constellation of spring is Leo. Ruling over the southeastern sky in the evening, it is one of the few constellations that actually looks like its namesake.

□ 26 — By late March, killdeers appear on pastures and other open areas with short grass. They get their name from their "kill-dee" call.

□ 27 — Sandhill cranes return to the Kawarthas and can sometimes be heard calling at dawn and dusk. This species has seen a steady increase in numbers in recent years.

□ 28 — Wild leek leaves poking through patches of late-March snow are often the first sign of new herbaceous plant growth. Leeks do not flower, however, until early summer.

□ 29 — Coyotes give birth to three to seven pups in late March or April.

□ 30 — The weasel's coat may be already turning from white back to brown. The change is caused by hormones that are released as a result of the lengthening hours of daylight.

□ 31 — Small flocks of tree swallows, the first true insect eaters to return to the Kawarthas, can sometimes be seen flying low over the Otonabee River and Little Lake in the last few days of March.

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