

## LIVING

LIFE EDITOR: JIM HENDRY 745-4641 ext. 242 / fax 743-4581 / life@peterboroughexaminer.com

# A little night romance

## Those who experience nature only in the daytime are missing half the show

*"How lovely are the portals of the night, When stars come out to watch the daylight die."*

Thomas Cooke

Some of my fondest memories of the natural world involve being out at night. Be it driving the back roads at the cottage in search of nocturnal mammals, standing on the muddy banks of a wetland while a thousand frogs roar in the background, or listening to the flight calls of migrating birds passing high overhead on a May night, experiencing nature by darkness has a romance all its own. Limiting your enjoyment of nature to the daytime hours means missing half the show.



Drew Monkman

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

This week, I'd like to talk about some of the key natural events of winter and spring that occur either at twilight or during the night itself. With a little effort and maybe a return visit or two, all of these events can be observed first-hand.

### WINTER

Winter skies at evening twilight can be quite beautiful. Purples and mauves often reign in the East, while reds and pinks light up the West. If you're out driving along country roads at dusk or dawn, watch for ruffed grouse high up in aspens and poplars as they feed on buds. The birds usually appear in silhouette. Later in the evening you may hear the mournful hooting of a great horned owl as it seems to ask and then answer: "Who's awake? Me, too." By mid-March, as many as four owl species can sometimes be heard. Quiet roads in the Keene area can be good for screech owls and great horned, while the Chandos Lake and Apsley area has a large population of barred owls. Northward bound saw-whet owls can turn up just about anywhere during their early spring migration. Coyotes, too, are quite vocal during the winter months.

Since the night sky changes over the course of the four seasons, knowing the constellations adds a great deal to our enjoyment of nature and the cycle of the year. In the north, take some time to familiarize yourself with the Big Dipper, Little Dipper and Cassiopeia. In the southeast, the Winter Six and their assortment of bright stars light up January evenings. Look for Orion, Canis Major, Canis Minor, Gemini, Auriga, and Taurus. There is usually a planet or two - maybe Venus or Jupiter, depending on the year - to be enjoyed as well.

Usually some time in February, male striped skunks roll out of their dens on damp, mild evenings and go on a long prowling looking for females with which to mate. The smell of a skunk on a late winter night is a time-honoured sign that "pre-spring" has arrived. I'm still waiting this year. Although you may wish to take a pass on observing the following event first-hand, there are shenanigans going on under the ice at night, too. Burbot, also known as freshwater cod or ling, spawn at night on rocky lake bottoms throughout our area. The fish form writhing balls of about a dozen intertwined individuals that roll across the lake bottom.

### SPRING

As we move into early spring, remember to keep an eye on the moon. This can be one of the best of the year to see "earthshine," the faint lighting of the dark portion of the moon during the waxing crescent stage. Watch the western sky just after sunset, two to four days after the new moon. Sandhill cranes have usually returned by late March and can sometimes be heard calling at dawn and dusk and even seen performing their courtship dance, replete with bowing, bobbing and leap-

ing into the air.

Mammals are generally quite active in spring. One way to see them is to drive slowly along back roads at dusk, shortly after dark, or then again at dawn. Agricultural areas are often good for white-tailed deer, coyotes, foxes, raccoons and skunks. For members of the weasel family such as fishers, larger tracts of relatively undisturbed habitat such as the area north of Havelock are a good bet.

No other season offers as many bright stars and constellations as spring. No fewer than 11 of the sky's brightest stars are visible. The signature constellation of spring is Leo. It is found high in the southern sky from early April to late June.

April is probably the best month of the year for enjoying nature at night. The courtship flight of the American woodcock provides wonderful entertainment. Listen for the "peent" sound of the male in the twilight period after sunset. As darkness falls, the calls become more numerous until the bird suddenly bursts into the air and climbs in wide circles to an altitude of about

100 metres. Air rushing through the stiff wing feathers causes a twittering sound. The sound then changes to liquid, warbled notes as the woodcock makes a zig-zag descent back to its take-off point. The nuptial flights stop when total darkness falls, although they may continue well into the night when the moon is full. Not to be outdone, the first bats also come out of hibernation and

take flight on mild evenings.

Woodcock aren't the whole show, however. By mid- to late April, spring peepers, wood frogs and leopard frogs start adding their own voices to the sounds of the night. Calling is loudest during the first few hours after sunset. Listen for the short, loud peep of the peeper, repeated once a second; the short, duck-like chuckles of the wood frog; and the rattling, guttural snore of the leopard frog.

On mild, rainy April nights, you may also witness another ancient rite of spring as thousands of salamanders make their way over snow, ice, rock and pavement to breed in their ancestral ponds. The salamanders follow an imprinted memory of their birthplace with its specific odours of mud and decaying vegetation.

You can even add a little fish watching to your April night. Walleye are spawning below dams in fast-flowing water over rocky bottoms. Lock 19 in Peterborough can often be good. Take a strong-beamed flashlight and watch for the orangish glow of the tapetum in the walleye's eyes when a light is shone

upon them.

May nights, too, are full of wonder. Long distance migrants are arriving from the tropics and filling the night sky with their contact calls. It is believed that most birds fly at night because there is less turbulence in the air, and it is also cooler. This helps birds maintain an appropriate body temperature without large water losses. What most impresses me, however, is how they navigate. Over millions of years, birds have evolved incredibly sensitive chemical compasses. Although it is not yet fully understood, it appears that iron-containing molecules located just above the birds' nostrils orientate according to the north-south direction of the Earth's magnetic field, almost like a compass needle. Stars, too, play a role. In their first year of life, some birds appear to actually learn the positions of the constellations in relation to the North Star. These constellations are visible all year long and therefore serve as a stellar road map between Latin America and Central Ontario.

May and June nights also belong to song. In early May, listen for the long, single-pitch trills of the American toad. Later in the month, the bird-like trills of the gray tree frog dominate the soundscape. Bird song, too, is at its strongest and most diverse at this time of year. The best listening is just before sunrise during the "dawn chorus" when dozens of species lend their voices to the avian orchestra. In the city, robins lead off the chorus starting well before any hint of light. And, on moonlit nights, it's not uncommon for birds such as sparrows to burst into song at any time at all.

Observing bats can also be a fascinating activity on warm June nights. They are often seen around a strong, isolated white light, usually near a body of water. Lights attract insects that in turn attract bats. In mid-June, some of these insects may be giant silk moths like the Io and the Cecropia. The male moths have large, feather-like antennae that serve to find a female. Females release airborne sex attractants called pheromones, which the male can detect up to five kilometres away!

Warm, late-spring nights are wonderful for watching other types of insects, as well. Most familiar are the fireflies with their Morse Code-like flashes of yellow light. However, an astute observer can also find many other species like camel crickets and fungus-feeding beetles. Make sure you invest in a good flashlight or headlamp. Don't forget to cast your eyes skyward, either, because the stars of the Summer Triangle - Vega, Deneb and Altair - have arrived. The Milky Way, too, provides its best showing of the year in late spring through early summer. Next week, I'll look at summer and fall and how plants have adapted to the cycle of day and night.

### TURTLE TRAUMA CENTRE

The Kawartha Turtle Trauma Centre (KTTC) is a licensed facility that rehabilitates and releases injured turtles. Most turtles are injured when they are hit by vehicles while crossing roads to lay eggs each spring. Seven of the eight turtle species found in Ontario are designated as Species at Risk, so the centre's work is of crucial importance. However, the centre now needs to find a new location before the end of May. It requires 1300 to 1800 square feet with a concrete floor, with a reliable water supply. The centre's board of directors is trying to find donated space, but is looking at ways to manage covering rent, if necessary. Anyone who has this type of space available can contact the centre at [info@kawarthaturtle.org](mailto:info@kawarthaturtle.org) or [call Jack Sisson at 748-9301 ext. 2203.](mailto:info@kawarthaturtle.org)

Drew Monkman is a Peterborough teacher and author of *Nature's Year in the Kawarthas*. He can be reached at [dmonkman1@cogeco.ca](mailto:dmonkman1@cogeco.ca). Visit his website and see past columns at [www.drewmonkman.com](http://www.drewmonkman.com).



RICK STANKIEWICZ Special to The Examiner



TIM DYSON Special to The Examiner

Waxing crescent moon (above) showing "earthshine" on the left side. Note Venus to the right of the moon.

A male Io moth (left) . . . note the feathery antennae for detecting the presence of a female

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