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Change is in the air

Spring's progression brings the most varied shifts in nature's sights and sounds

For most of us who take pleasure in watching the seasons unfold, spring is the finest time of year. In no other season can we enjoy more change and diversity in our flora and fauna than in the months of April through June. From the raucous chorus of the spring peeper and the spectacular sky dance of the woodcock, to the explosion of leaves and the smell of the May air, this is a season that delights all of the senses.



Drew Monkman
OUR CHANGING SEASONS

As spring advances, the axis of the Earth becomes increasingly tilted toward the sun and the length of daylight rapidly increases. The main consequence of this tilting is a huge increase in the amount of heating of the northern hemisphere. The warming causes new plant growth to "spring forth," giving the season its name.

EARLY APRIL

- Migrating waterfowl numbers usually peak on Little Lake, the Otonabee River, Lake Katchewanooka and open areas of Buckhorn Lake. Ring-necked ducks, buffleheads, mergansers, scaup and goldeneye dominate. Puddle ducks such as pintails, wood ducks and teal often congregate in flooded fields such as the meltwater pond that forms each year just south of Mather's Corners.

- April is a very busy time for feeders. Northward-bound tree sparrows and dark-eyed juncos move through the Kawarthas in large numbers. Watch also for the large, thrush-like fox sparrow.

- The red maple is maybe the best named of all trees. The buds and twigs are red; when new leaves emerge they have a reddish tinge; the stems of the leaves are red; the fall colour is often a deep scarlet; and, right now, the very visible flowers are also red.

- The yellow, dandelion-like flowers we see growing in roadside ditches in early April, sometimes before snowbanks have melted, are a non-native species known as coltsfoot.

- Close to 30 species of local birds are already nesting this month. Among these are the crow, red-tailed hawk, mourning dove, house finch, starling, Canada goose, killdeer, mallard, bald eagle, house sparrow, common grackle, robin, cardinal and blue jay.

- April sees a new woodpecker arrive on the scene, namely the migratory yellow-bellied sapsucker. It loves to hammer on resonant surfaces such as street signs to advertise ownership of territory.

MID-APRIL

- If the weather is mild, local wetlands should be alive about now with the clamorous calls of thousands of frogs. The first voice usually heard is that of the chorus frog which sounds like someone running a thumb over the teeth of a comb. Within a few days, wood frogs, spring peepers, and leopard frogs add their voices to the symphony, as well.

- If you want to see yellow-spotted and blue-spotted salamanders, wait for a mild, rainy night when the first frogs are calling. Drive slowly along back roads that pass through low woodlands with nearby swampy areas or flooded ditches. You should be able to see both species making their way to breeding ponds.

- When water temperatures reach 7C, walleye begin to spawn. Along with white suckers, they can sometimes be seen spawning at night at Lock 19 in Peterborough.

LATE APRIL

- Hepatica are usually the first wood-

The progression of spring brings (clockwise from top centre): cold-foot, which usually grows on the shoulder of roads in early spring; maple sugar flowers; choke cherry trees flower, and are the host to most tent caterpillars; the Canadian tiger swallowtail butterfly is common in early June; yellow lady's-slipper – probably the most common of the native orchids in the Kawarthas, especially in the Warsaw area



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land wildflowers to bloom in the spring. The flowers can be pink, white or bluish in colour. Bloodroot will join the wildflower parade by month's end.

- White-throated sparrows are passing through and are easily attracted to feeders if you put seed on the ground. Listen for their high-pitched, whistled "Oh sweet Canada" song.

- Elm trees are in flower and look like they are covered with myriad brown raindrops. The small, wind-pollinated flowers are clustered in tassels.

- The courtship flight of the American woodcock provides nightly entertainment in damp, open field habitats such as some of the fields near the Peterborough Airport. Listen for their nasal "peep" call which begins when it's almost dark.

- The first tropical migrants are arriving! Listen for the song of the northern waterthrush in swampy, forested areas. It's one of the easiest warbler songs to learn.

EARLY MAY

- Watch for skeins of northern Canada geese passing over as they make their way to nesting grounds on James Bay. They fly considerably higher and in much larger flocks than our local geese.

- A variety of interesting butterflies are already on the wing as May begins. These include the Compton tortoise-

shell, the eastern comma and the mourning cloak. Try Petroglyphs Provincial Park.

- The yellow-gold flowers of marsh marigolds, also called cowslips, brighten wet habitats throughout the Kawarthas.

- The first of the year's dragonflies can now be seen. Watch for the green darner, American emerald, Hudsonian whiteface, beaverpond baskettail and four-spotted skimmer.

- Make sure your hummingbird feeders are ready because the birds will be arriving back any day now, mostly from southern Mexico. To prepare nectar, mix 1 part sugar to 4 parts water and boil for one minute.

- Blackflies are usually at their worst about now. In most species, the female requires a blood meal in order to get the required nutrients for egg development. Both the male and female also feed heavily on nectar.

- Calling both day and night in long, fluid trills, the American toad provides one of the most characteristic sounds of early May. To listen to this and other amphibian calls, go to www.naturewatch.ca/ and click on "frogwatch."

- Drooping in tassel-like clusters, countless thousands of tiny yellow flowers decorate sugar maples. The pistils, or female flowers, will produce clusters

of plump, paired keys.

MID-MAY

- The damp morning air is rich with the fragrance of balsam poplar resin, a characteristic smell of spring in the Kawarthas. You can rub the sticky buds of this common tree at any time of the year and be instantly transported through the sense of smell to a morning in May!

- Mid-May is the peak of songbird migration with the greatest numbers of migrating warblers, vireos, thrushes, orioles and flycatchers passing through. If you have a window that birds often hit, drawing the blinds during the day or placing window decals on it can reduce collisions.

- Pin cherries bloom in mid-May at about the same time as lilacs. The five-petaled, white flowers are little more than a centimetre in diameter. A little later in the month, chokecherry blossoms appear.
- Sounding remarkably like birds, gray treefrogs serenade us with their slow, musical trills. This species often calls during the day but is most vocal on warm, damp evenings.

- Blooming white trilliums blanket woodlots throughout the Kawarthas. Watch, too, for yellow trout lily and large flowered bellwort amongst other species.

- The last frost in the Kawarthas usu-

ally occurs about May 18.

LATE MAY

- That large, streaked sparrow-like bird at your feeder is probably a female rose-breasted grosbeak. Just in from Costa Rica, grosbeaks are attracted to sunflower seeds

- Eastern tent caterpillars emerge in mid-May from shiny egg masses wrapped tightly around the twig of a cherry or apple tree.

- Wild columbine is now in bloom on rocky hillsides and along roads and trails. The flowers, a beautiful blend of red and yellow, hang in a bell-like fashion and are often visited by hummingbirds.

- White ash, American basswood and both red and white oak finally come into full leaf.

- Bass, bluegills and pumpkinseeds begin to spawn and are a common sight near docks.

- The seeds of elms, Norway and silver maples spin to the ground and often make for a lot of raking to clean up.

- The very conspicuous Canadian tiger swallowtail butterfly appears by month's end. Males spend much of the day patrolling in search of females and will fly the same route over and over.

EARLY JUNE

- The annual roadside flower parade begins with mustards and buttercups blooming first.

- In downtown Peterborough and Lakefield, chimney swifts are putting on quite a show. Pairs can be seen in courtship flight as they raise their wings and glide in a V position.

- Common carp are spawning. They can be seen thrashing at the surface of shallow rivers, bays and backwaters.

- Birdsong is at its most diverse. Make a point of getting up and listening to the "dawn chorus," the fervent birdsong that takes place each morning before the sun comes up. Robins usually lead off the show.

- Smallmouth, largemouth and rock bass, along with pumpkinseeds and bluegills, are spawning and can be seen guarding their shallow-water nests.

- Painted turtles and snapping turtles are often seen along roadsides and other sandy locations laying their eggs. Please slow down in turtle-crossing zones and, if safe, help the reptile across the road.

- On warm, still nights, giant silk moths are sometimes attracted to white lights. They may be seen flying around the light or sitting on the pole or ground. Watch especially for the cecropia.

- Serviceberries, also known as Juneberries, are the first shrubs to boast ripe fruit.

MID-JUNE

- Ox-eye daisies and dames'-rocket bloom in fields and along roadsides.

- Black cherries and black locusts come into flower. Locust flowers are very aromatic.

- The green frog's banjo-like "poink" is a widespread sound in wetlands both day and night.

- The male cones of white and red pines release their pollen. Decks, picnic tables and shorelines look like they've been powdered with a yellow dust.

- The first monarch butterflies of the new year are usually seen sometime during the first half of June.

- More than 20 species of orchids bloom this month. Among them is the spectacular showy lady's slipper.
- The summer solstice occurs on June 21, 2009 at 1:45 a.m. The sun will rise and set farther north than on any other day of the year.

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