

# localnews

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## LIVING

# Singing a song of April

## Bird return, frogs emerge . . . no other month is marked by such a wash of sound

April's identity comes down to one thing - song. Be it the courtship hammering of yellow-bellied sapsuckers or the chorus of robins, cardinals, and mourning doves that awaken you at 6 a.m., April is very much a month of sound. Ruffed grouse drum intermittently all day long as northward-bound geese call like barking dogs from high overhead. When evening comes, the nasal "beep" of the woodcock is joined by the incessant calling of spring peepers, wood frogs, and leopard frogs. Learning nature's myriad sounds greatly enhances one's enjoyment of the changing seasons.



Drew Monkman

OUR CHANGING SEASONS



Salamander and bloodroot by Drew Monkman  
White-throated sparrow, woodcock and cottontail by Karl Egressy

A yellow-spotted salamander (centre) might be found on mild, rainy nights. Clockwise from top left, the white-throated sparrow, bloodroot flowers, woodcock and cottontail rabbit will all appear locally in April.

cold, wet springs which cause nest failures.

The dates and occurrences listed below are typical of April in the Kawarthas. Remember that a large part of seeing is simply knowing what to expect.

- 1 - With the mild weather we are experiencing, local wetlands should now be awakening to the calls of chorus frogs and spring peepers. The former sounds like someone running a thumb over the teeth of a comb, while the latter sings a short, loud "peep" repeated once a second.
- 2 - Migrating waterfowl continue to pass through. Check out Little Lake, the Otonabee River, Lake Katchewanooka and Buckhorn Lake for species such as ring-necked ducks, buffleheads, mergansers, scaup and goldeneye.
- 3 - Silver maples, a common city tree, are putting on quite a show right now. Dense clusters of flowers in tinges of red, yellow and green festoon the twigs. The winged samaras (keys) will appear in June.

### SALAMANDER SPOTTING

- 4 - If you want to see salamanders, wait for a mild, rainy night in early to mid-April when the first frogs are calling. Drive slowly along back roads that pass through low woodlands with nearby swampy areas or flooded ditches. Be careful, however, so as not to run over any of these beautiful amphibians crossing the road. You should be able to see both the yellow-spotted and blue-spotted salamanders making their way to breeding ponds.
- 5 - Watch for the yellow, dandelion-like flowers of coltsfoot growing along roadsides. Later in the month, the white, fluffy seed heads also resemble those of dandelions. Coltsfoot initially produce only flowers; the leaves won't appear until later in the spring.
- 6 - Don't be too surprised if a half-crazed robin or cardinal starts pecking at or flying up against one of your windows. Both males and females are very territorial and instinctively attack other individuals of the same species - in this case, their reflection! The banging can start at dawn and last until dusk - for weeks on end! The simplest solution is to tape a piece of cardboard over the outside section of the outside where the bird is pecking.
- 7 - In the evening, look for the beautiful yellow-orange star, Arcturus, in the eastern sky. This time-honoured harbinger of spring is the second brightest star visible from northern latitudes. Arcturus is believed to be one of the first stars named by ancient observers. Its name is translated as Guardian of the Bear, a reference to

nearby Ursa Major.

- 8 - After their late-winter mating season, cottontail rabbits are giving birth. The young, naked and blind, are usually found in a fur-lined depression under a shrub. They grow so fast that they are ready to live on their own after only a month.
- 9 - Now is a good time to learn the songs of Peterborough's early spring birds, namely the chickadee, robin, cardinal, mourning dove, grackle, starling, house finch, and song sparrow. I find the best way to remember each song is to use a mnemonic or memory aid. For example, the American robin seems to say: "cheer-up, cheer-a-lee, cheer-ee-o." Go to [www.1000plus.com/BirdSong/](http://www.1000plus.com/BirdSong/) for a great list of mnemonics.
- 10 - Close to 30 species of local birds are already nesting this month. Among these is the American robin. The female (the one with the dull orange breast) selects the nest site and does most of the nest building. Robins have two and even three clutches of eggs each year. The same nest is sometimes used for multiple clutches. The male actively defends the territory around the nest through all clutches. You can often see him aggressively pur-

when tens of thousands of migrating tree swallows could be seen flying over the Otonabee River and adjacent roads and fields. Now we're lucky to see a few dozen together. Some biologists believe a possible decline in the number of flying insects is to blame.

- 11 - Up until about seven years ago, there were usually several days in mid-April
- 12 - April sees the return of our only migratory woodpecker - the yellow-bellied sapsucker. It loves to hammer on resonant surfaces such as street signs to advertise ownership of territory. Butterflies, as well as other bird species, feed at the shallow holes the sapsucker makes in trees to get sap. For this reason, it is considered a "keystone" species, one that has a larger impact on its community or ecosystem than would be expected.
- 13 - Along shorelines and the edges of wetlands, alder trees are producing male catkins that grow into long, hanging, caterpillar-like structures that shed puffs of bright yellow pollen when touched.
- 14 - Eastern bluebirds are nesting. Thanks to the success of well-designed bluebird boxes, this species is once again relatively common. Weather is now the biggest factor influencing bluebird population fluctuations, especially

- 15 - April is a very busy time for feeders. Northward-bound tree sparrows and dark-eyed juncos are moving through the Kawarthas in large numbers right now. Listen for male juncos singing their even, musical trill. The song is quite similar to that of the chip-sparrow.
- 16 - 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 or below the pedestrian bridge in Young's Point. Take along a strong-beamed flashlight.

### FIRST WILDFLOWERS

- 17 - Hepatica are usually the first woodland wildflowers to bloom in the spring. The flowers can be pink, white or bluish in colour. Look for them on south-facing forest hillsides or right at the base of a large tree. The name "hepatica" comes from the fact that the three-lobed leaves reminded early naturalists (who were often also physicians) of the lobes of the human liver.
- 18 - Earth Week starts today. A clean-up is scheduled at Millennium Park starting at 10 a.m. Meet at the boathouse.
- 19 - Most local lakes are usually ice-free by this date. This year, however, the ice will probably already be out by now.

### Email alert

I must apologize that due to problems with my email program, I may not have received some emails from readers over the past several months. If you had sent an email and did not hear back from me, please feel free to send it again if you wish. I very much enjoy hearing from readers and make a point of answering all emails.

- 20 - The ruby-crowned kinglet is a common but little-known April migrant. Smaller than a chickadee, this hyper-active gray bird has a distinctive white eye ring and a long, boisterous call that would seem to come from a much larger bird.
- 21 - White-throated sparrows are passing through and are easily attracted to feeders if you put seed on the ground. They're also a great entree into the world of birdsong, since the wavering whistle of their Oh-sweet-Canada-Canada-Canada song is one of the easiest to learn.
- 22 - Elm trees are in flower and look like they are covered with myriad brown raindrops. The small, wind-pollinated flowers are clustered in tassels.
- 23 - 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. When the male launches itself into the air, listen for the twittering of the wings in flight.
- 24 - The muffled drumming of the ruffed grouse is one of the most characteristic sounds of April. The birds drum to advertise territorial claims and to attract a female. After mating, the male has nothing more to do with reproduction; the female raises the young alone.
- 25 - Bloodroot joins the wildflower parade about now. Eight large, white petals make it stand out, as do the large, deeply cut leaves. The juice from the root was used as a body paint and dye by Native Americans.
- 26 - After a winter in the southern United States, yellow-rumped warblers return. The male is quite stunning in his blue-gray back feathers, black breast and yellow patches on the rump, sides and crown. These birds usually show up in flocks in spring. Listen for a loud "check" call note.
- 27 - Watch for early butterflies such as the mourning cloak, eastern comma and, by month's end, the dainty spring azure. It is all blue.
- 28 - Tonight is the full moon. If you happen to be out enjoying the moonlight and hear a snoring sound coming from the marsh, it's probably the call of the leopard frog.
- 29 - The first tropical migrants are arriving back from Central and South America. Among those to be expected right now are northern waterthrush, broad-winged hawk, and chimney swift.
- 30 - North-bound loons fly over Peterborough on late April mornings. Even if you don't see the bird, you may hear its yodeling call, which is often given on the wing.

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