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LIVING

Buzzing through month of May

Dry, warm spring brings early arrivals . . . and might keep mosquitoes in check

As in 2006 and 2008, abnormally warm weather that arrived in late March and April has turned spring's traditional timetable on its end. Many plants have already flowered, some a full three to four weeks ahead of schedule. On April 18, for example, I found a few red and white trilliums already in bloom. Their average flowering date is May 15!



Drew Monkman
OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Frogs, too, have responded by starting to call quite early. However, the dry conditions have meant that there are fewer spring run-off ponds than usual, which could mean that some amphibians, especially salamanders, won't find sufficient water to be able to reproduce. On the other hand, dry conditions might result in fewer mosquitoes than during an average spring.

About the only species that almost always stick to their long-term spring timetable are neotropical migrants from Central and South America. As a rule they are less affected by the vagaries of the weather on their northern breeding grounds. Therefore, with the exception of long-distance migrants, most of the following dates and events are earlier than in an average year, especially with regard to plants, frogs and insects.

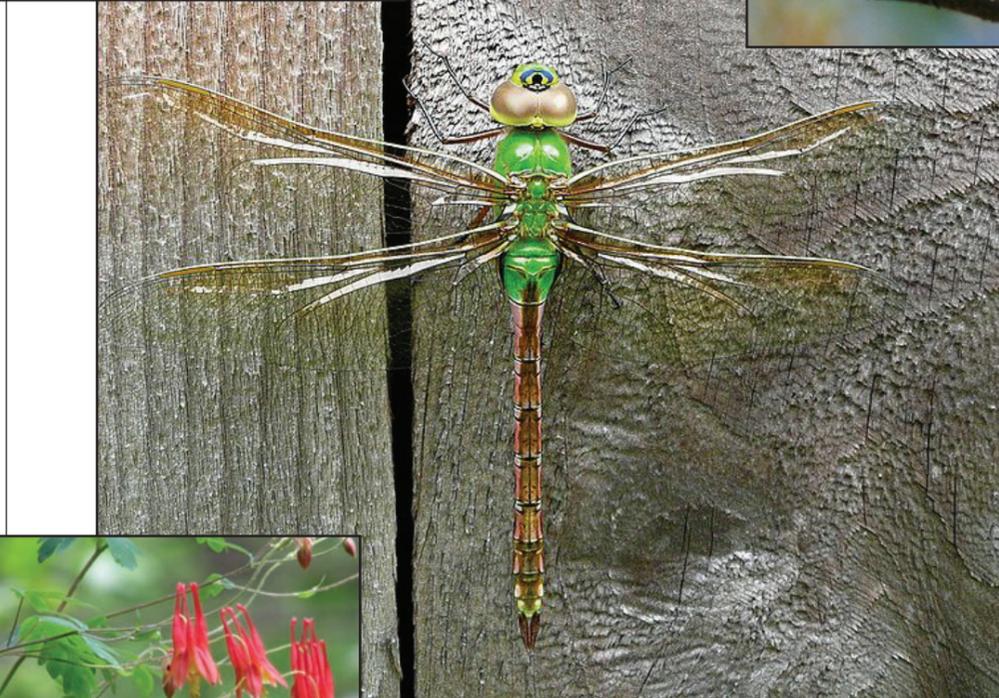
• 1 - The white blossoms of serviceberries, also known as Juneberries, are a common sight along country roadsides. Pin cherries are coming into bloom now, too. The five-petaled, white flowers are little more than a centimetre in diameter. Chokecherry, followed by black cherry, will soon flower as well.

• 2 - This is the time to see the "spring ephemeral" butterflies such as the elfins. Watch for small, brownish butterflies flying up from gravel roads and woodland trails.

• 3 - The damp morning air is rich with the sweet, pungent fragrance of balsam poplar resin, a characteristic smell of spring throughout the Kawarthas and often right in Peterborough. The scent originates from the sticky sap that oozes from balsam poplar buds as they open.

• 4 - Calling both day and night in long, fluid trills, the American toad provides one of the most characteristic sounds of early May. When several males are calling together, each will sing at a slightly different pitch. With the amphibian calling schedule greatly accelerated this year, gray treefrogs should be joining the chorus any day now. Sounding remarkably like birds, gray treefrogs deliver their song in two-second bursts, a sound some people compare to a "gentle" machine gun. This species often calls during the day but is most vocal on warm, damp evenings. To listen to these and other amphibian calls, go to www.nature-watch.ca. Then, click on frogwatch and field training.

• 5 - Chimney swifts return to downtown Peterborough. Watch for a bird with a flickering, almost bat-like flight that is usually accompanied by a sharp, chipping call. Swifts roost and nest in



Special to The Examiner

The common green darner (above) is the largest dragonfly in the Kawarthas and usually the first to appear. Other signs of the progress of spring in May are (clockwise from top left) the singing American toad, a male indigo bunting (photo by Karl Egressy) and red wild columbine flowers.



chimneys. However, because old brick chimneys are quickly disappearing, the chimney swift is designated as a threatened species in Ontario.

• 6 - Make sure your nectar feeders are out and ready, because ruby-throated hummingbirds will be arriving from southern Mexico any day. This species is actually more common now than 20 years ago, thanks to the increased popularity of hummingbird feeders and flower gardening. The Kawarthas is a popular destination.

• 7 - Blackflies are usually at their worst as part now. If it helps, think of them as part of the price we pay for wildflowers. Blackflies feed heavily on nectar. In the process, they inadvertently pollinate many species of plants such as blueberries.

• 8 - Dragonflies are fascinating insects to observe and photograph. The common green darner, our largest dragonfly, is usually the first to be seen. The thorax (where the wings are attached) is bright green and the abdomen is mostly blue.

• 9 - A variety of sedges are in bloom. In Mark S. Burnham Provincial Park, on Hwy. 7 just east of the city, watch for plantain-leaved sedge, distinctive broad-leaved sedge of upland woods.

• 10 - Drooping in tassel-like clusters, countless thousands of tiny yellow flow-

ers decorate sugar maples. Most flowers have both male and female parts. The pistils, or female flowers, will produce clusters of plump, paired keys.

• 11 - Mid-May is the peak of song-bird migration with the greatest numbers of migrating warblers, vireos, thrushes, orioles and flycatchers passing through.

• 12 - Migrating rose-breasted grosbeaks sometimes show up at sunflower feeders, so keep your feeders stocked until month's end. The female grosbeak is a large, streaked, sparrow-like bird that often confuses people as to its identity.

• 13 - Windows take a huge toll on migrating birds in the spring and fall. Even small windows can be dangerous. If you have a window that is particularly bad, you might to tape it. Most birds will avoid windows with one-quarter-inch-wide, white, vertical stripes spaced four inches apart, or one-eighth-inch, black, horizontal stripes spaced one inch apart. The migration months of May and September are the most crucial for protecting birds from window collisions.

• 14 - Turtles will soon be laying their eggs. With nearly all our local species at risk of eventual disappearance, this is a wonderful time to support the Kawartha Turtle Trauma Centre. The centre is holding a fundraiser this

evening, The Art of the Turtle, at the Peterborough Public Library from 7 to 10 p.m.. You can acquire a beautiful work of "turtle art" by silent or live auction. Tickets are available at Titles Bookstore. For more information, call Annita Newell at 778-3578 (annigrammi@yahoo.com)

• 15 - The song of the indigo bunting once again rings out from telephone wires and tree tops on the margins of shrubby fields. The bright blue male is an inveterate songster, singing even during the hottest part of the day. He might sing up to 200 songs a minute at dawn, decreasing to about 60 during most of the day.

• 16 - Wild columbine is 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.

• 17 - Ponds are often teeming with tadpoles in mid-May. Species such as spring peepers will turn into fully-formed frogs in about 12 days. Bullfrogs, however, remain in the tadpole stage for up to three years.

• 18 - The last frost in the Kawarthas usually occurs about May 18. Frost will generally not occur again until September, giving our area an average of 135 frost-free days.

• 19 - Oaks are in flower. The caterpillar-like male flowers (catkins) are as long as the emerging leaves. The tiny

female flowers that produce the acorns bloom at the base of the leaves.

• 20 - Finding mushrooms in May is not easy. However, with some luck you might find morels. The cap is shaped something like a pine cone. Morels are edible but be sure of the identification.

• 21 - Eastern tent caterpillars emerge in mid-May from shiny egg masses wrapped tightly around the twig of a cherry or apple tree. Even though they may completely defoliate the tree, new leaves grow within a matter of weeks. Tent caterpillars are an important food for orioles and cuckoos.

• 22 - Beavers, red squirrels, flying squirrels, otters, porcupines, ground-hogs, skunks, deer and moose are among the large variety of mammals that give birth this month.

• 23 - High in the northeast sky, Ursa Major appears "upside down" with Polaris and Ursa Minor below it.

• 24 - Frothy, white masses of spittle are now a common sight on the stems of field plants. They are created by spittlebug nymphs that suck juices out of the plant's stem and then excrete the excess. This creates a froth which envelops the insect, provides it with protection, and prevents it from dehydrating. Kids enjoy finding the nymph in the froth. Spittlebugs do not harm plants, nor does the frothy mass.

• 25 - Adult June beetles, also known as June bugs, emerge from the soil and crash full-speed into screen doors and windows at night. They will often then buzz around on their backs, making quite a racket. The larvae of this familiar insect are the much-maligned, C-shaped white grubs that can damage the roots of grass and shrubs.

Sometimes, skunks and even crows will pull back the turf in search of a meal of grubs. Adult June beetles emerge from the soil at dusk and feed on deciduous leaves during the night.

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

• 27 - White-tailed deer fawns are usually born in late May or early June.

• 28 - If you live in the country and have woods along the side of your yard, you might be hosting a family of redstarts. The male of this five-inch-long warbler is mostly black with red spots on the chest, wings, and tail. He is a tireless singer.

• 29 - Look-alike alder and willow flycatchers are generally the last birds of spring migration to arrive back in the Kawarthas. They can only be told apart by voice.

• 30 - The cottony, white material floating on the May breeze and collecting on lawns and sidewalks might be mistaken for snow if it wasn't for the temperature. Instead, it is made up of tiny seeds, each attached to a bit of fluff, released by trembling aspen trees.

• 31 - Canadian tiger swallowtail butterflies should be on the wing. The yellow wings are striped in black. The hind wings have extensions that look like the tail of a barn swallow.

Drew Monkman is a Peterborough teacher and author of *Nature's Year in the Kawarthas*. He can be reached at dmonkman1@cogeco.ca. Visit his website and see past columns at www.drew-monkman.com.

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