

localnews

www.peterboroughexaminer.com

Editor JIM HENDRY jim.hendry@sunmedia.ca 745-4641 ext. 242

LIVING

Warming up to March again

Last year's unprecedented warm spell threw nature for a loop. Could it be repeated?

So far this winter, the weather has been all over the map. While December and January were about 4C warmer than normal, February brought mean daily temperatures that were comparable to the 1971 to 2000 average. We have also seen big swings in temperature from one day to the next and the kind of freeze-thaw action that seems to spawn potholes almost overnight.

Only one year ago, we had our warmest March on record with temperatures above 20C by mid-month. Spring peepers were already calling by March 18 and American toads by March 21. By about the same time, the ice was



DREW MONKMAN

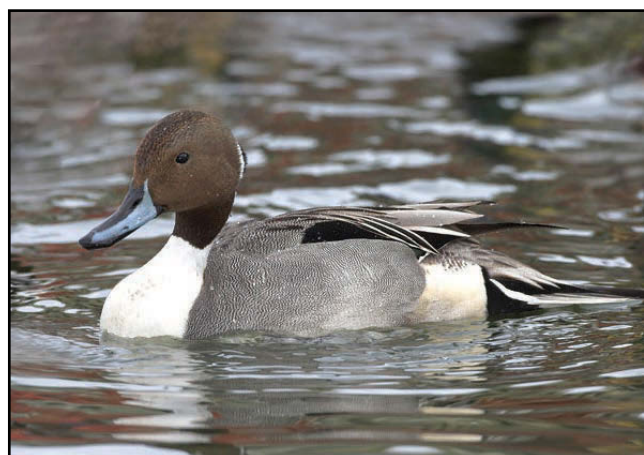
OUR CHANGING SEASONS

already out on most of the Kawartha Lakes. On March 22, with temperatures approaching 25C, the forsythias in my neighbour's yard were at peak bloom, the male catkins were already past maturity and falling from our trembling aspen, violets were blooming in the lawn and weeping willows throughout the city were a pastel green as leaves began to emerge. All of these events were occurring a full three to four weeks ahead of schedule.

The summer-like temperatures also caused the flower buds on apple trees across the province to open a month early, resulting in an 80% loss in Ontario's apple production when many of the flowers were later killed by April frosts. What March has in store for us this year is anybody's guess, but if the pattern of recent years is any indication, warmer than usual temperatures can be expected.

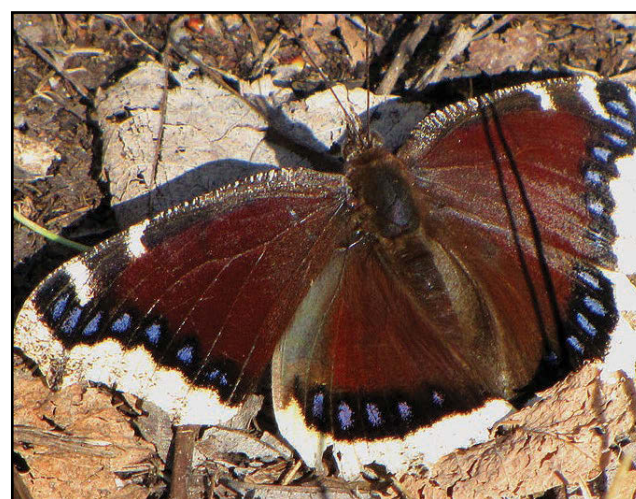
The events described below are typical of March in the Kawarthas and are listed more or less in chronological order. Many events occur over the entire month.

- 1 - We begin the month with 11 hours of daylight and end with over 12 ½ - a gain of more than 90 minutes.
- 2 - Male red squirrels feud over territory as the mating season begins. Their common "cherr" scolding call becomes louder and more common. Watch, too, for high-speed chases as males pursue females through the tree-tops.
- 3 - Bufflehead, goldeneye, and common merganser duck numbers increase on the Otonabee River and open sections of Little Lake.
- 4 - Great horned owls are usually on their eggs by now. Biologists believe that early nesting allows the young owls to be ready to hone their hunting skills in late spring when prey is most plentiful and the majority of prey animals are young themselves and therefore inexperienced at avoiding predators.
- 5 - Chipmunks are making their first appearance above ground since late fall. They did remain somewhat active over the winter, however, making repeated trips to their underground storehouses for food.
- 6 - On clear, warm afternoons along woodland trails, watch for snow fleas. Only about a millimetre in length, thousands can sometimes be seen covering the surface of the snow like pepper. Instead of moving with legs or wings, snow fleas use an abdominal appendage held under the body that

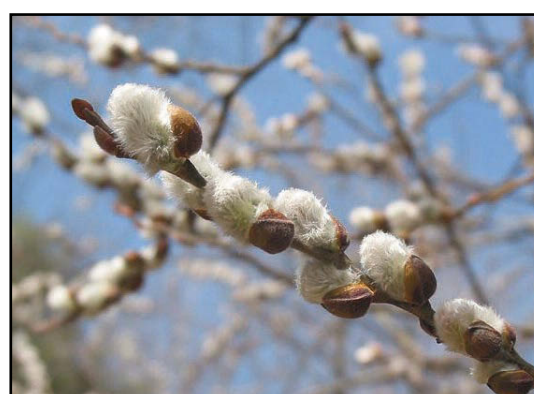


KARL EGRESSY Photos

The sandhill crane (top) and northern pintail duck are two of the many birds that return to this area in March. Among other signs that spring is coming are the mourning cloak butterfly (top right) and soft, silvery pussywillows.



Wikimedia



Wikimedia

Backyard bird success

Local participation in this year's Great Backyard Bird Count was far greater than any other year. In Peterborough County, 124 different observers took part and recorded a record 59 species. 370 checklists were submitted which is more than four times the previous high.

An additional 19 people in City of Kawartha Lakes participated and observed 43 species. A big thanks to everyone who took part!

springs them up and forward when released.

- 7 - House sparrows and starlings are already laying claim to nest boxes or simply a cavity in a street light pole. They are also much more vocal than earlier in the winter and a common sound in downtown Peterborough.
- 8 - Honeybees are among the few insects that remain active all winter. Honey provides the energy to fuel the hive's cold-weather survival. In March they grow more restless and fly more often outside of the hive.
- 9 - Watch for male crows performing courtship displays that include facing the female and fluffing up his body feathers. He then partially spreads his wings and bows repeatedly, all the while making a rattling song. He may also present the female with food.
- 10 - Daylight savings time begins today. Move your clocks ahead one hour. The phrase "spring forward, fall back" is a helpful reminder.
- 11 - Flocks of male red-winged blackbirds are now returning to local wetlands. These early arrivals typically perch on the highest branches of trees and are therefore easy to see.
- 12 - The buds of lilac, red-berried elder, red maple, and silver maple swell noticeably this month and stand out

clearly against the late-winter sky.

- 13 - The furry catkins of pussy willows and aspens poke through bud scales and become a time-honoured sign of spring. Aspens, like willows, have hairy buds.
- 14 - Bald eagles lay their eggs between now and early April. This is followed by a 36-day incubation period. Eagles were already on the Lake Katchewanooka nest in late February and may have laid their eggs earlier than usual this year.
- 15 - The first northbound turkey vultures are usually seen on about this date. Each year, a particularly reliable group lingers for a week or more in the west end of Peterborough and roosts at night in tall spruce trees off of Roper Dr.
- 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. Buckhorn Maplefest this year will be held on the weekends of March 16 and 17, March 23 and 24, and March 29, 30 and 31. Go to www.mcleanberryfarm.com/ for details.
- 17 - Today is St. Patrick's Day. This Irish saint is said to have ridden Ireland of snakes. It's unfortunate that some people continue to persecute these fas-

inating reptiles. The Kawarthas is home to nine snake species, four of which have been designated as species at risk.

- 18 - A sugar bush can be a good place to see early spring insect activity. Flowing maple sap attracts insects such as bees, ladybird beetles, mourning cloak butterflies and three-spotted sawfly moths.
- 19 - The very popular Presqu'ile Waterfowl Weekend takes place March 16 and 17 from 10 am to 4 p.m. You will be able to appreciate one of Ontario's great natural spectacles, namely the return of thousands of migrating waterfowl to their staging areas along the lower Great Lakes. Numbers can reach 20,000 birds and 20 different species seen on one day is not an unusual occurrence. Volunteers with powerful spotting scopes will be on hand to show you the birds. The park is located at Brighton, about an hour's drive south of Peterborough.
- 20 - Today is the spring equinox. On this date, both the moon and sun rise due east and set due west. If you need a reason to celebrate, we are gaining daylight faster now than at any other time of year - over two minutes a day.
- 21 - The increase in bird song is now very noticeable. If you don't already

know the songs of the common birds like the American robin and the song sparrow, this is a great time to start learning them. A good website to try is www.birdjam.com/learn.php

- 22 - Open sections of local lakes and rivers are host to thousands of northward-bound ducks of a dozen or more species, impatiently awaiting the departure of the ice. Some good locations to observe them include Lock 20 at Little Lake, South Beach Rd. in Young's Point, Six Foot Bay Rd. on Buckhorn Lake, and Scriven Rd. on Rice Lake.

- 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 widgeons, blue-winged teals, black ducks and wood ducks.

- 24 - March is probably the one time of year when dandelions are a welcome sight. Watch for them along the bottom of southward facing walls where snow melts away quickly. Here, the first green grass appears and, often, the first dandelions bloom. In woodlands, you should be able to see wild leek leaves poking through patches of late-March snow.

- 25 - If the weather has been exceptionally mild, the first spring peepers and chorus frogs may begin calling.

- 26 - March is usually the best time to listen for owls. As many as four or five species can sometimes be heard. By month's end, you may also hear the first ruffed grouse, common snipe and American woodcock.

- 27 - Sandhill cranes return to the Kawarthas and can sometimes be heard calling at dawn and dusk and seen performing their courtship dance. It includes head bobbing, bowing and leaping into the air. Douro Third Line is sometimes a good place to see these increasingly-common birds. Google "sandhill crane mating dance" for a great Youtube video.

- 28 - Male muskrats range far and wide looking for love and will mate with as many females as they can find. Muskrats are often found dead on the road in spring, when their wanderings bring them into the path of automobiles.

- 29 - Large numbers of robins and grackles have returned by now. Grackles are those foot-long, glossy-purple black-birds that make a loud "chack" call as they fly around your neighbourhood in small groups.

- 30 - Small flocks of tree swallows can sometimes be seen flying low over the Otonabee River and Little Lake in the last few days of March. They feed heavily on midges - a small fly - that emerge from their pupal cases at the surface of the water.

- 31 - No other season offers as many bright stars and constellations as spring. In the evening, watch the northeastern horizon for Arcturus, the harbinger of spring and the alpha star of the Bootes constellation. You can find Arcturus by projecting the arc of the Big Dipper's handle to the next brightest star.

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

Karl Egressy is a Guelph nature photographer. To see more of his work and to contact him go to www.kegressy.com.