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LIVING

May calls in cooler clothes

Spring weather returns to normal after warm years . . . or is warm new normal?

For the first time in recent memory, we are seeing a gentle weather transition into May with temperatures more typical of the long-term average. Events in nature such as leaf-out and frog song are therefore taking place more or less when we would expect them to – and not two weeks earlier than usual as they have for much of the last decade. Although April turned out to be about 1 C cooler than normal, 24 of the past 28 months have been warmer than the 1971-2000 average. Some research has suggested a link between a retreat of Arctic sea ice (as a result of climate change) and a stationary mass of warm air over Greenland that redirected air currents and created a pattern of winds coming from the northwest. This, in turn, blasted eastern North America with Arctic air for much of April.



DREW MONKMAN

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

The following events in nature are typical of May in the Kawarthas. They are listed more or less in the order in which they occur. If you would like to see a gallery of May nature photos – many of which were sent to me by readers – go to my new website at drew-monkman.com. Among other things, you will also find all of my past columns, nature sightings, a table of temperatures going back to January 2011 and a seasonal bird abundance chart for common species.

- 1 Although not as flamboyant as the reds, oranges and yellows of fall, May offers an equally beautiful flush of colour. Right now, watch for the dazzling white blossoms of serviceberry (Juneberry) and the countless ruby-red flowers decorating the crowns of the red maple.

- 2 The yellow-gold flowers of marsh marigolds, also called cowslips, brighten wet habitats throughout the Kawarthas. They are often easy to see in roadside swamps such as those along University Rd., just south of Nassau Mills Rd.

SPRING'S VIOLIN

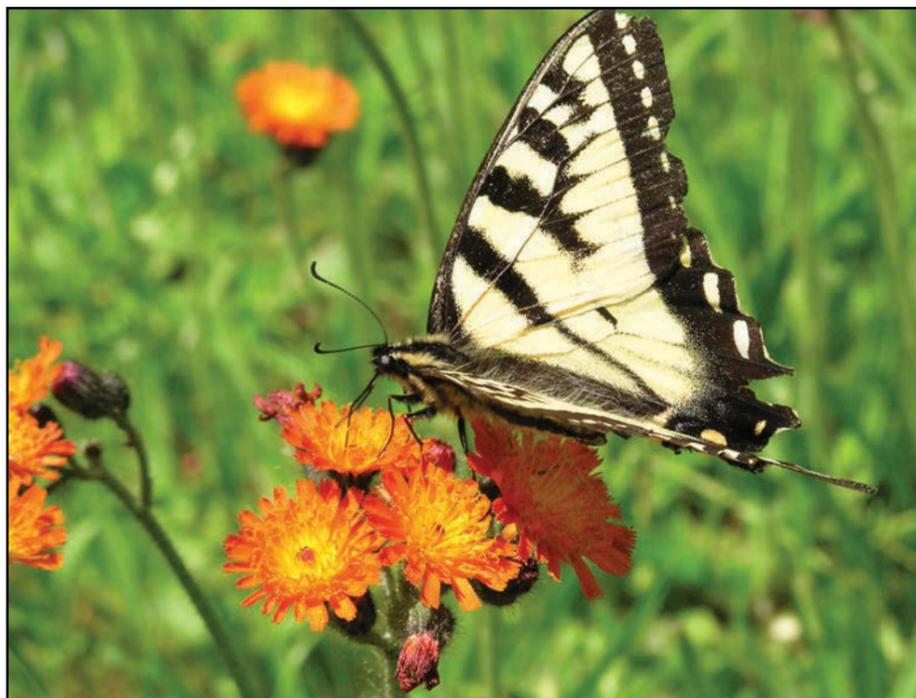
- 3 In early May, watch for fiddleheads emerging among the dead leaves of the forest floor. They are the young, coiled leaves of ferns and resemble the scroll at the end of a violin.

- 4 Calling both day and night in long, fluid trills, the American toad provides one of the most characteristic sounds of the season. To hear the call, go to YouTube and search "American toad calling."

- 5 With many species nesting, be sure to keep your cat indoors. Ask that your neighbours do the same. It is estimated that several billion birds are killed by free-roaming owned and feral cats in North America each year.

- 6 Make sure your hummingbird feeders are up and ready for business, because the hummers will be arriving back from their Central American wintering grounds any day now. To prepare nectar, mix 1 part sugar to 4 parts water and boil for one minute.

- 7 The spring azure is one of the very first butterflies to emerge from its chrysalis in spring. Watch for a tiny butterfly that is sky-blue above and white



TERRY CARPENTER photo



DREW MONKMAN photo

below.

- 8 Dragonflies are fascinating insects to observe and photograph. Right now, the number of species is fairly limited so identification is easier. Keep an eye open for the green darner, American emerald, Hudsonian whiteface, beaverpond baskettail and four-spotted skimmer.

- 9 Drooping in tassel-like clusters, countless thousands of tiny yellow flowers decorate sugar maples. Most flowers have both male and female parts. The pistils, or female flowers, will produce clusters of plump, paired keys.

- 10 The damp morning air is rich with the sweet, pungent fragrance of balsam poplar resin. The scent originates from the sticky sap that oozes from balsam poplar buds as they open.

SONGBIRDS FLOCK BACK

- 11 Mid-May is synonymous with the peak of songbird migration. The greatest diversity of warblers, vireos, thrushes, orioles and flycatchers is now arriving back in the Kawarthas from the tropics.

- 12 Migrating rose-breasted grosbeaks sometimes show up at sunflower feeders, so keep your feeders stocked up until month's end.

- 13 Windows take a huge toll on migrating birds in the spring and fall. On one of my windows that is particularly bad, I put up "Window Alert" decals in the spring and fall. They have drastically reduced the number of collisions. You can find them at the Avant-Garden Shop on Sherbrooke St.

- 14 Midland painted turtles and, in some areas, Blanding's turtles, are a common sight on logs and hummocks in local wetlands. The only way turtles can raise their body temperature and digest food is by absorbing heat from their surroundings.

- 15 The soft, light green needles of the tamarack are every bit as beautiful in May as they are in late October, when they turn smoky-gold.

RED AND YELLOW BELLS

- 16 Wild columbine should now be 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.

- 17 Wetlands, roadside ditches, and even backyard swimming pool covers are often teeming with tadpoles at some point this month. Species such as spring peepers will turn into fully formed frogs in about 12 weeks.

- 18 Dandelion blossoms cover lawns and fields in a mantle of yellow. They provide copious amounts of pollen and nectar to insect visitors. Insects see the flowers as shining points of ultraviolet light set against a background, which they perceive as grey.

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

- 20 Morel mushrooms fruit in May and early June. The cap is shaped something like a pine cone with a series of pits and ridges. Morels are edible but be sure of the identification, since poison-



DREW MONKMAN photo

A trio of choristers that return to the Kawarthas each spring are (below) the American toad, indigo bunting and ovenbird. One of the most colourful butterflies is the swallowtail (top left), and flowering plants that add to the colours of May include serviceberry (above) and marsh marigold.



KARL EGRESSY photo



Wikimedia



KARL EGRESSY photo

ous look-alikes do exist.

- 21 The song of the indigo bunting once again rings out from telephone wires and tree tops on the margins of shrubby fields. (YouTube: "Indigo Bunting")

- 22 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. (YouTube: "Eastern gray treefrog calling")

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

- 24 The Algonquin name for the full moon of May is the Flower Moon. Watch for it to rise this evening at about 8:30 p.m.

- 25 A large variety of mammals give birth this month. These include beavers, red squirrels, flying squirrels, otters, porcupines, groundhogs, skunks, deer and moose.

FUTURE FISH FRY

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

- 27 Moles are very active this month. Watch for ridges and mounds of soil on lawns. The soil is pushed up to the surface as the animals tunnel through the dirt in search of earthworms and other invertebrates.

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

- 29 Woodlands across the Kawarthas resonate with the boisterous "teaCHER, teaCHER" song of the ovenbird as it lays claim to its nesting territory. (YouTube: "Ovenbird")

- 30 Trembling aspens release their tiny seeds, each attached to a bit of cottony, white fluff that floats effortlessly on the May breeze. They might be mistaken for snow if it wasn't for the temperature.

- 31 Large, yellow and black Canadian tiger swallowtail butterflies appear by month's end. Males spend much of the day patrolling in search of females and will fly the same route over and over.

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

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