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LIVING

Early for lambs, cold for lions

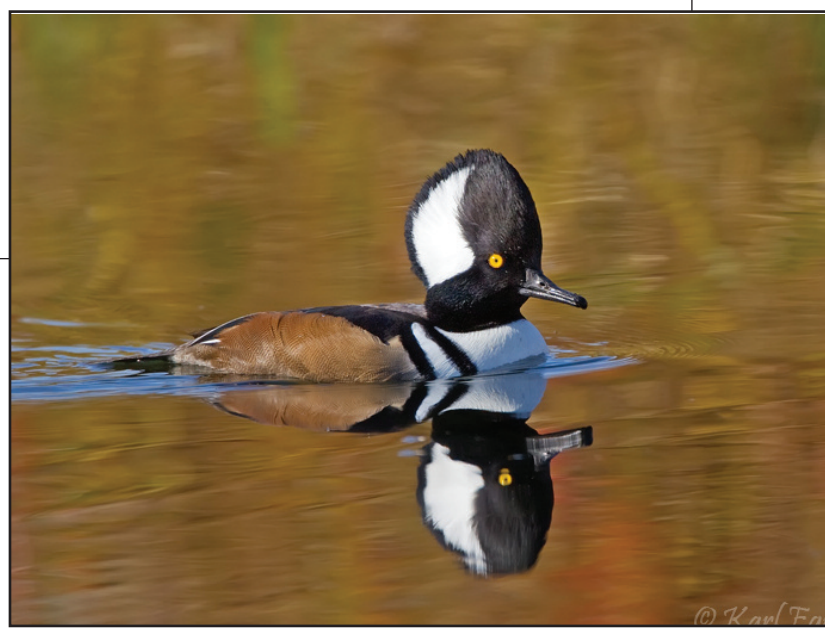
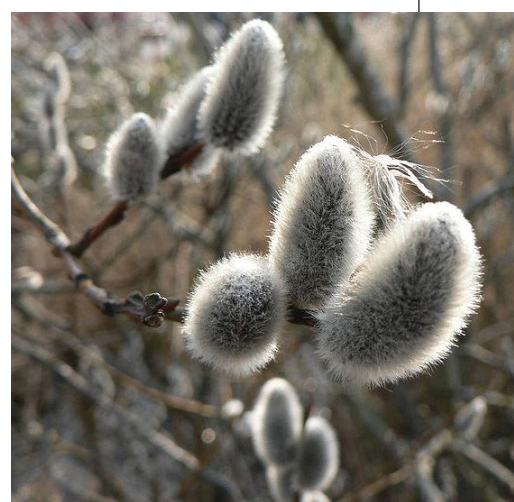
March is a month of extremes yet there is still a pattern to the return of wildlife

March is often a month of extremes, be they blizzards and bitter cold or rain and full-fledged thaws. However, no matter what the weather may throw at us this month, March is very much a time of transition whose purpose is to usher in spring. And signs of spring's arrival are everywhere. Earlier sunrises and later sunsets make for longer, brighter days. March reveals itself, too, through the return of boisterous bird song as returning migrants advertise ownership of nesting territories. The smell of the thawing earth and boiling maple sap also make known the change of season. Make a point of savouring spring's arrival and noting the changes that occur each and every day.



Drew Monkman

OUR CHANGING SEASONS



March can come in like a lamb (as it did this year) or a lion, but among the partners it can be counted on to bring along are (clockwise from above) dandelions, sleepy raccoons, downy pussy willows and the hooded mergansers that are an early arrival on the Otonabee River.

KARL EGRESSY photos

The events listed below are typical of March in the Kawarthas. However, some of these happenings occur over the entire month and are not restricted to any specific date.

- 1- Bufflehead, goldeneye, and common merganser duck numbers increase on the Otonabee River, and the first hooded mergansers since last November usually appear.
- 2- Male red squirrels feud over territory as the mating season begins. Their common "cherr" scolding call becomes louder and more common. After a 38-day gestation, two to five young will be born.
- 3- Breeding season also begins for raccoons. We often see wandering tracks in the snow that mark the travel of males in search of receptive females. Tracks and sightings that were sporadic all winter now become much more common. After about eight weeks, a litter of usually four babies will be born.
- 4- A less-than-welcome sign of spring is the reappearance of house flies. Although they lay eggs in the fall that will hatch later in the spring, many adults also survive the winter by sleeping in a hibernation-like state called diapause. Adults seen in March have been aroused from diapause by the warmer temperatures. Watch for house flies on sunny exterior walls where basking revives them and raises their body temperature.
- 5- Chipmunks are also 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. Unlike groundhogs and jumping mice, chipmunks cannot carry enough body fat to take them through hibernation without eating.
- 6- On clear, warm afternoons along woodland trails, watch for snow fleas on the surface of the snow. Only about a millimetre in length, thousands can often be seen covering the snow like pepper. Also known as springtails, they don't move with legs or wings like other insects do. Instead, they use an abdominal appendage held under the body that springs them up and forward when released.
- 7- House sparrows are already laying claim to nest boxes. The male will often perch on the box and call repeatedly to show ownership of the real estate and to attract a female. Our resident pair of house sparrows has been busy around the box outside our kitchen window since late February.

- 8- Honeybees are among the few insects that remain active all winter. Honey provides the energy to fuel the hive's cold-weather survival. Now, in March, with longer, warmer days, they grow more restless and fly more often outside of the hive.
- 9- The male crow performs courtship displays that include facing the female and fluffing up his body feathers. He then partially spreads his wings and tail and bows repeatedly while uttering a brief, rattling song.
- 10- Dark objects such as fallen leaves and tree trunks absorb sunlight and transform it into heat. This heat melts the surrounding snow. Snow melt may extend out from the tree trunk by as much as a foot. Mosses at the base of the tree get a peek at sunlight for the first time in months.
- 11- Pairs of red-tailed hawks begin soaring together over their woodlot territories.
- 12- The buds of lilac, red-berried elder, red maple, and silver maple swell this month and become much more noticeable than earlier in the winter.
- 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. However, aspens grow only on twigs from the upper

branches of what is a much taller tree than the pussy willow.

- 14- Daylight savings time begins today. Put your clocks ahead one hour.
- 15- The first northward-bound turkey vultures are usually seen on about this date. Each year, a particularly reliable group of these birds lingers for a week or more in the west end of Peterborough and roosts at night in tall spruce trees off of Roper Drive.
- 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 the weekends of March 20 and 21, March 27 and 28, and April 2, 3, and 4. Go to www.mcleanberryfarm.com/ for details.
- 17- St. Patrick's Day. This Irish saint is said to have ridden Ireland of snakes. It's unfortunate that Western tradition sees these reptiles in such a negative light. Almost all of Ontario's snakes have severely declined over the last century. The Kawarthas is home to nine snake species, four of which are at risk of disappearing from the province. The eastern hognose snake is particularly threatened.
- 18 - The first songbirds have usually returned by mid-month. In the city, the most notable new arrivals are

robins and grackles. Grackles are those foot-long, glossy-purple blackbirds that make a loud "chack" call as they fly around your neighbourhood in small groups. They have a long, wedge-shaped tail.

• 19- The very popular Presqu'île Waterfowl Weekend takes place March 20 and 21 from 10 a.m. 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. Seeing 20 different species of waterfowl in a day is not unusual. Close views of the birds are usually possible, as well. Volunteers with spotting scopes are stationed at key areas to help visitors find and identify the different ducks, geese, swans and grebes. The Nature Centre, featuring waterfowl displays and children's activities is open from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.. The Lighthouse Interpretive Centre, with hot drinks and snacks, and The Friends Gift Shop are open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.. The park is located at Brighton, about an hour's drive south of Peterborough.

• 20- The increase in bird song is now very noticeable. If you don't already know the songs of the common city birds, this is a great time to start learning them. A good website to try is www.birdjam.com/learn.php

• 21- Today is the spring equinox. At 1:32 p.m. the sun will cross directly over the Earth's equator. For the next six months, we can enjoy days that are longer than nights. On this date, both the moon and sun rise due east and set due west.

• 22- Open sections of local lakes and rivers are host to thousands of northward-bound ducks, impatiently awaiting the departure of the ice. Some good locations to observe them include Lock 20 at Little Lake, South Beach Road in Young's Point, Six Foot Bay Road on Buckhorn Lake, and Scriven Road 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 wigeon, blue-winged teal, black ducks and wood ducks. Tundra swans sometime show up here, as well.

• 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. Dandelion leaves remain green all winter, thereby allowing the plant to respond quickly to the warmth and sunlight of early spring.

• 25- No other season offers as many bright stars and constellations as spring. There are no less than 11 first magnitude stars visible. The season's signature constellation is Leo. Ruling over the southeastern sky in the evening, this large but rather dim constellation actually looks like its namesake.

• 26- March is usually the best time of the year 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 birds.

• 28 - By late March, field birds to listen for include eastern meadowlark, song sparrow, and killdeer. Killdeer get their name from their calls of "kill-dee" or "kill-deeah."

• 29 - On a warm March day, we may get a glimpse of a mourning cloak butterfly emerging from its winter sleep. The mourning cloak gets its name from its dark, purple-black wings, bordered with a yellow margin. This reminded early naturalists of the dark clothing worn by people in mourning.

• 30 - Small flocks of tree swallows, the first true insect eaters to return to the Kawarthas, can usually be seen flying low over the Otonabee River and Little Lake in the last few days of March. This species used to be abundant during spring migration along the Otonabee River but, like other aerial foragers, has now declined considerably.

• 31- If the weather has been exceptionally mild, the first spring peepers and chorus frogs might begin calling.

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