



# NATURALIST'S CORNER

## What's Happenin'?

(Liliaceae): Top, nodding trillium (*Trillium cernuum*); Left, flower of *Trillium recurvatum*; Right, dwarf white trillium (*Trillium nivale*)

Welcome to the Happenin' Season! With the close of winter, birds are busy raising a brood; hibernators are awake and looking for grub; amphibians are developing in vernal pools; leaves are unfurling. A lot is happenin' here in New England! I thought I'd lay out some specific examples for you to be alert for as you venture out on your springtime forays.

### April

**\*Amphibians:** Many amphibians breed in April, including the wood frog, Northern leopard frog, and spring peeper. They are now emerging from brumation (the term for hibernation in cold-blooded animals) and gathering in great numbers in vernal pools to mate and lay eggs. Listen for their calls. Wood frogs sound like quacking ducks. The leopard frog has a drawn-out, throaty snore. Spring peepers are perfectly named for their chorus of high-pitched peeps.

**\*Reptiles:** Reptiles too are emerging from their hibernacula, finding mates, and laying eggs. The North American racer is the earliest snake to emerge. This long, thin, nonvenomous black snake is speedy but might be found sunning itself on a rock on a warm day. Painted turtles also emerge early from being buried in the mud in freshwater ponds and slow streams. Basking is the first order of business, mating second. A male woos a female by waving his long front claws right in front of her face where she is certain to understand his intentions.

**\*Birds:** Birds may be the most noticeable harbingers of spring in the animal kingdom. One of the most fascinating courtship displays this month is performed by the timberdoodle, otherwise known as the American woodcock. In a field around dusk, listen for his nasal "peent" calls, meant to get the attention of his intended. Watch in the fading light as he spirals upward, perhaps 300 feet, with a whistle of his wing feathers. Then, chirping musically, he zig-zags downward at impressive speed.

**\*Plants:** April is awash with blooming and emerging plants. Look for fiddleheads – those beautiful, curled stems that will unfurl to become fern fronds. In wet areas, look for clusters of false hellebore whose broad, deeply veined leaves are so much more appealing to me now than later when it blooms. Scan the woods for a delicate splash of white on a small tree or shrub; this may be the shadbush. Its blossoming occurs when American shad are coming upriver to spawn. It is also called serviceberry, as this is when circuit-riding preachers started coming around conducting services for colonists who had died over the winter and now could be buried.

**\*Mammals:** Some mammal activity can be seen now that the snow is gone, or even when the snow is still lightly covering the ground. By chewing through the grass, meadow voles have built a system of tunnels above ground but under the snow. Little round domes of grass attest to voles' temporary nests. Raised mounds of dirt in your yard or field are made at this time of year by moles as they tunnel around hunting for insects. Moles below the soil, voles above.

### May

**\*Reptiles:** Many species of turtles reproduce over a period of months, but generally, breeding peaks in May. Snapping turtles, Eastern box turtles, and wood turtles are busy at it this month. Because the gestation period for garter snakes is three to four months, mating takes top priority upon emergence from brumation. Male garter snakes sometimes form a "mating ball" around one female, vying to be "the chosen one."

**\*Birds:** The forest should now be replete with birdsong as many passerines are bonding, nesting, and brooding. Get your birding in early this month if you want to catch a glimpse before trees leaf out. Otherwise, you can bird by ear. A few to listen for are the increasingly insistent "teacher-TEACHER-TEACHER" of an ovenbird, "witchity-witchity-witchity" of the common yellowthroat, and "pee-a-whoee" of the Eastern wood peewee. Meanwhile, great horned owlets are now fledging – the adults having laid eggs in February or March.

**\*Mammals:** Gray squirrels may do some treetop acrobatics to feast on the protein-rich flowers of oaks and maples. Beaver kits and bobcat kittens accompany their parents, while red fox pups wait outside their den for a parent's return.

**\*Plants:** Wildflowers that I love are blooming in a hurry now, before the canopy shades the forest floor. Look for the gender-changing Jack-in-the-pulpit (or is it a "Jill?"), as well as trillium, toothwort, bishop's cap, Dutchman's britches, and trout lily in early May, if not already blooming in April. Crouch down and look underneath last year's raggedy leaves for Massachusetts' state flower – the Mayflower – and take a sniff of its sweet scent.

**June**

\***Amphibians:** Although the green frog has emerged from winter dormancy as early as March, its peak breeding season is now. Listen for its banjo string-like twang. Watch your step so as not to squash those bright orange red efts rambling around the woods. This is the juvenile stage of the Eastern newt, who was born in the water and will return to the water as a breeding adult.

\***Birds:** June is a busy time for rearing offspring. Cliff and barn swallows, who build their nests out of mud, are now getting down to laying eggs and incubating. Red-shouldered hawks have hatched and are nearly ready to fledge.

\***Mammals:** This is black bear mating season. One-and-a-half-year-old cubs have been kicked out by their mother and are trying to make it on their own – a very difficult time for them. Chipmunks are ready to raise their second litter by now. You may see youngsters from the first litter venturing out on their own.

\***Plants:** White pine male cones are maturing and releasing airborne pollen now, dusting everything with a yellow coating. If you paddle a boat on a pond, you are likely to see bulbous yellow flowers called spatterdock or bull-head lily on the surface. I've seen beavers snacking on this flower. The sweet-scented water lily also decorates our ponds with its beautiful bright white blossom.

There are so many things to observe in your springtime walks. I invite you to contribute to the phenology database the Club has been keeping for nineteen years now. Write down the first observations of springtime occurrences, such as when daisies begin to bloom, nesting of your neighborhood house wren, or first sighting of hummingbirds. By being keenly aware of the rhythm of nature, we can harmonize with its marvelous dance.

– Nancy Condon

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