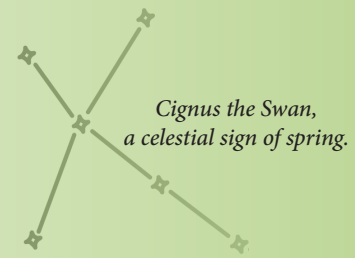


NATURALIST'S CORNER

A SPRINGTIME VOYEUR



It's spring. The sun has crossed the equator. Days are getting longer and warmer. The Earth is slingshotting around the sun and into a new realm of space. Orion is lost to the morning sun, but the birds of spring, Aquila the Eagle, and Cygnus the Swan, now fly across the Milky Way.

It's spring, and I become a voyeur in search of the structures of sex: flowers. The first one I seek emerges while snow and ice still linger on the landscape. My journey home from work takes me on a long, circuitous route so that I might find this harbinger of warmth to come. It is the skunk cabbage that draws my attention. Hidden beneath a spathe lies a structure covered with tiny flowers. Often overlooked due to its swampy location and pungent aroma, it is a survivor. Using stored starch, the plant generates its own heat to attract and shelter gnats as pollinators. It may be cold outside, but inside the spathe, both flowers and pollinators live in a domain of 70°F comfort.

It's spring, and the ground is cold. The sun waxes stronger each day. Outside my front door, the rays beat down on a stone wall. The wall's mass stores the heat, radiating it out at night to warm the surrounding soil. The growing intensity stirs the dormant plants. Energy hidden in roots, bulbs, and seeds is released. The first plant to appear is the exotic European snowdrops. Its narrow scape and leaves push through soil and snow to produce a single nodding flower of three white tepals. Its bent head protects the growing pollen and nectar from April showers. Squirrel corn, Dutchman's britches, wild oats, Solomon's seal, blueberries, huckleberries, and even some trilliums employ the same strategy. Pollen and nectar are too precious to be lost in a deluge.

It's spring, and nights may dip below freezing. Like Henry David Thoreau, I go on early morning walks to the same locations year after year to "visit my ladies." My favorite is an early riser like me: bloodroot. The snow is gone, and the soil has warmed. Hidden beneath the leaves of fall are the first signs of my friend. She pushes slowly through the detritus, often snagging an old leaf. Both flower stalk and leaf emerge as one, the single leaf wrapped tightly around the stem like a blanket wrapped around a chilled child. As the day warms, the leaf opens to expose the stalk and a perfect white flower – *perfect* in that "she" has both male and female parts. The warmth of the day allows the stamens to produce pollen. As the evening cold settles back onto the plant, the leaf again embraces the flower. Again, it opens as the day warms. Eventually, the leaf's role changes from protecting the pollen to shielding the ripening seed in the pistil's ovary. The leaf's role will change again after the seed has fallen: It will gather and send energy to the roots, to be stored for a new flower next spring.

It's spring, and the world has again awakened from its long winter's nap. Summer is but a few weeks away. Trees will leaf out. Our spring ephemerals will retreat back to the soil. But summer will bring a new crop of flowers and new challenges for those plants to overcome.

~Tom Condon

Green is the prime color of the world, and that from which its loveliness arises.

~ Pedro Calderón de la Barca