

Old Naturalist – Signs of Spring

For those of us who endure a winter with below freezing temperatures and short day lengths, the coming of spring can be cause for a great celebration. In the dead of winter, you're lucky if you hear a lonely chickadee call. However, in the spring the sound can be overwhelming, and it can fill the empty places in your heart with joy.

One way to celebrate the coming of spring is to mark the first time that you see a special signs of spring. Studying the time of natural events is a science called phenology. A phenologist would notice and record the blooming date of the first tulip, the first migratory flock of Canada geese, and other events in nature. Jim Gilbert, is a noted phenologist who has kept records in Minnesota for the past 40 years. There is no better time to start practicing phenology than springtime.

What to do: Record the date of each sign of spring that you observe.



First cardinal whistling
Date: _____

Chickadees and cardinals calling: These birds do not migrate, but spend the entire year in the upper Midwest. So seeing a chickadee or cardinal is not a spring sign, but hearing their spring calls is a sign of spring. I have heard the spring call of a cardinal in January, when it was - 20° F., and it brought joy to my weary heart.



“Fee-bee” call of the Chickadee
Date: _____



First active raccoon
(tracks or observed)
Date: _____

First raccoon: Raccoons start mating in mid February. The males will leave their tree hollows to find a female. If the temperature goes above freezing, expect to see raccoon tracks in the snow.

Maple syruping: The maple sap begins to “run”, when the temperature goes above 40° F. After the sap is collected, it needs to be boiled down to make syrup. It takes 40 gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup.



Maple syruping
Date: _____



First active chipmunk
Date: _____

Squirrel mating behavior: In late winter, the squirrels start chasing each other around. Some are males who are battling for a home territory. Others are males chasing females around.

First chipmunk: Chipmunks are not true hibernators because they store food in their burrows, and wake up and eat during the winter. When the temperature goes above 40° F. look for chipmunks.



Squirrels chasing (mating behavior)
Date: _____



First migrating geese
Date: _____

First migrating geese: What can be more inspiring than hearing the honking of a flock of migrating geese after a long winter? Their sound fills up the empty places.

First redwing blackbird: In mid March the male redwings migrate into the cattail marshes. You can hear their sweet call, “okalee-okalee” as the males set up their territories before the females arrive.



First redwing blackbird
Date: _____



First active groundhog
Date: _____

First groundhog: Groundhogs hibernate longer than most animals. They lose approximately 2/3 of their body weight during the winter. Look for groundhogs by mid-March.

First frog: There are several species of frogs that come to the ponds to call and breed. The wood frog starts mating soon after the ice leaves the ponds. It makes a “clucking” call that sounds like a chicken.



First frogs calling or seen:
Date: _____



First dandelion blooming
Date: _____

First dandelion blooming: I look for the first dandelion blooming on the south facing side of buildings. The soil near the building has warmed up enough to allow plants to grow earlier.

First turtle: After a few days above 60°, look for turtles on logs in a nearby pond.



First turtle
Date: _____



First wood tick
Date: _____

First wood tick: Wood ticks are active as soon as the temperature rises above 55° F. When the weather warms up, it is not a good idea to walk on deer trails, because the young ticks are hatching.

First active garter snake: Garter snakes hibernate in groups under the ground. After a few warm spring days, garter snakes may appear. In fact, you might see several garter snakes sunning near their winter hibernaculum (underground home.)



First active garter snake
Date: _____



First migrating robin
Date: _____

First robin: The first robins appear by mid-March. For many of us, seeing a robin is a sure sign of spring. After a few days, the males begin singing their beautiful melodic song, and once again our yards are filled with sound.



First mosquito
Date: _____

First mosquito: No one looks forward to hearing the first mosquito buzzing around. However, as soon as the ponds melt, the larva hatch from eggs laid in a previous year. It takes two weeks for the larva to metamorphose into an adult.



First migrating oriole
Date: _____

First migrating oriole: May 1st is unofficially called “oriole day” in Minnesota. States to the south, probably claim oriole day to be a few weeks earlier. The oriole’s call and its beautiful color makes seeing the first oriole a special blessing.



First migrating monarch
Date: _____

First monarch: Monarchs are one of the last migrants to return to the Midwest. The “ragged ones” that make the long migration from Mexico, begin laying eggs soon after arriving.

If you really enjoy studying phenology, you will need to purchase Jim Gilbert’s book: Gilbert, James. *Minnesota Nature Notes*. Minneapolis, MN. Nodin Press, 2008.

Give yourself 2 points if you took a signs of spring of hike. Give yourself 2 points if you found 4 signs of spring. Give yourself 2 more points if you found 8 signs of spring.

Total possible points: 6 points Total points for you: _____