

The welcome sounds and sights of the harbingers of spring

by Ted Bailey

It seems that spring this year is having a difficult time establishing itself. Snow is scattered but still piled deeply among the trees. Lakes, including Skilak Lake, are still frozen, and two to three inches of new snow arrived on the ground before melting on the morning of May 3.

But there have been previous years when spring arrived later than we would have liked. Fortunately I have already experienced one spring back in Ohio this year.

In April, I listened to cardinals, robins and house wrens singing in the early mornings and saw displays of spring wildflowers, including white spring beauties, yellow trout lilies, blue bluebells and purple violets in the eastern hardwood forest. And daily I watched as my mother's lilac bushes first budded out, then rapidly burst into bloom within a two-week period.

Despite the snow and ice when I returned to Alaska, the harbingers of my second spring of the year began to put in their appearance. First were the flights of calling sandhill cranes and Canada geese flying in huge V's overhead. Then gulls calling and flying over the still frozen lake near our house, appearing as impatient for the ice to melt as are we humans.

But I associate the true arrival of an Alaska spring with three other natural events. These events usually occur together, but not always in the same sequence.

The first event is the winnowing sound made by the aerial displays of territorial snipe. Though more common in the evenings, at their peak, these migrant male snipe displays occur throughout the day. The sound is made by air rushing through their feathers as the birds constantly circle and dive around the boundaries of the territory they are attempting to establish.

They are difficult to see when they are displaying because they are relatively small birds, fly high in the sky and are constantly on the move. Many people hear these sounds but have no idea of their source. A male snipe establishing his territory near our home began displaying over the black spruce bogs during the last week of April.

The second event that I associate with the appearance of spring is the arrival and calling of the male ruby-crowned kinglets. They are often the first long-distance migrant songbirds to arrive on the peninsula.

Like the male snipe, the tiny male ruby-crowned kinglet is also establishing his territory. But unlike the snipe, this tiny bird with a small ruby-colored spot on the top of its head has a big voice that's hard to miss. The kinglet makes its unique call as it flits from the top of one spruce tree to another around the boundary of its territory. The first one to arrive near our home began singing on Saturday.

The third spring event is the vocalizations of breeding wood frogs. So far—as of Sunday—I have yet to hear the local wood frogs begin their chorus. But I expect to hear them any evening now, and by time this article appears, I am certain they will be calling.

Unlike the birds that left to spend the winter in a warmer area, these wood frogs have literally been frozen under leaves and other debris in the ground during the winter and have to first thaw out. Their extraordinary physiology, which allows their bodies to actually freeze solid and survive, is unique among the higher animals and is the subject of research.

Imagine space travelers of the future being frozen until they arrive at their distant destination. Did you see “2001: A Space Odyssey?” Perhaps the wood frog will someday help us in our exploration of space.

There are many other “signs” in our natural world that spring is finally here. The appearance of the first robin and loons calling from a lake are others. But in my book, the displaying snipes, ruby-crowned kinglets singing and wood frogs calling are the “signs” of spring I anticipate and enjoy each year.

Too soon we will be complaining about the mosquitoes. Enjoy spring! It doesn't last long.

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