



## Nature Guides

### Spring Awakenings: Plants, Birds and Bugs

Late March 2011

Reminder: Spring will officially be here in Ontario ([Spring Equinox](#)) on March 20<sup>th</sup> at 1:32PM (DST), except in the far northwest. The word equinox comes from Latin, meaning equal night – day and night will be 12 hours each. Still can't quite get your head around it? [This site](#) gives a good overview of sun-earth geometry. Consider having a Spring Equinox celebration!

Featured Event: Plants Awake

We mentioned some stirrings earlier, but the spring flush now begins in earnest:

- The first flower you notice will probably be yellow, as [Coltsfoot](#), an introduced species, will bloom along lowland margins, followed by the native [Marsh Marigold](#). Note, since Marsh Marigold is toxic and irritating when handled, and Coltsfoot is carcinogenic when consumed, consider limiting your interactions to viewing and photographing.
- [Skunk Cabbage](#) will also bloom along those margins, often melting away any late snowfall from around its flowers through a process called [thermogenesis](#). These plants actually create heat to protect and support their early spring lifestyle, generating as much energy as a small rodent or hummingbird through a metabolic process more similar to animals' than plants'. They can maintain a temperature of 1.7°C (35°F) when the surroundings are below freezing. Why go through all this? For the same reason most plants flower: to attract pollinators, only with heat instead of food. The name is appropriate, and the rather rank smell also attracts carrion eaters (flies and some bees) who, ever optimistic that food is at hand, will provide pollination. There is also some evidence that wind plays a role in pollination, so it may be covering all of its bases! A very detailed and somewhat lyrical description of the plant and its life cycle can be found [here](#).
- [Wild Leek](#) is one of the first herbs to sprout new leaves in the spring, sometimes [dusted by late snow](#) on the forest floor. Like many spring forest plants, leeks use this opportunity of unobstructed sunlight to capture and store the sun's energy in underground [bulbs](#), which is used in early summer to flower and seed, and then maintain the plant until the sun returns next spring. And they're tasty too, but keep sustainability in mind. Overharvest in [Québec](#) threatened the species survival, causing the government to prohibit the sale of Wild Leek and limit personal take. If you are buying Wild Leeks make sure they were harvested [legally and sustainably](#).
- [Aspen](#) and [Speckled Alder](#) catkins will be added to those of the willows, and those aromatic Balsam Poplar buds may be [opening](#).
- Around the schoolyard, look for [early growth](#) from planted bulbs such as crocuses and [snow drops](#), and 'weeds' like [Birdseye Speedwell](#). Consider setting up a 'first bloom' calendar, with photos, and mark when each kind of plant or tree that you see first opens its buds, unfurls its leaves, or flowers. Keep it to compare to next year's dates.

Other Happenings:

#### Top R4R Picks

Resources for extending the learning

[Canada's Forests and Wetlands: Vol. 6 – Our Natural Water Filters – gr. 5–8](#)

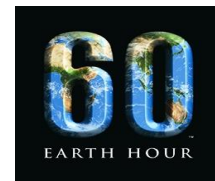
Elementary, Middle

[Canada's Forest Vol. 2 – A Breath of Fresh Air](#)

Middle

Lesson 7 The Seasons of a Forest

- Returning [Tree Swallows](#) may be found [swooping](#) low over open water. Since they are largely insect eaters, this means that aquatic insects may be beginning to rise and ‘hatch’ into their adult forms. Waves of different hatches will now occur until fall.
- The swallows are likely eating [midges](#), several species of small, dark flies that look like mosquitoes with large, feathery antennae. Look for [clouds](#) of them [hovering over trees](#), shrubs, or other objects near water. These are males. Females are attracted by the pitch of their wing vibrations, and the females’ pitch when flying into the swarm attracts the males. Mating ensues, often within seconds. I once knew a guy with perfect pitch who could mimic the sound of a female midge, and attract nearby male swarms! Go on a midge search (don’t worry – these particular midges don’t bite), and watch how these swarms dance on a light breeze. Aerial insectivores, like Tree Swallows, as a group (or more properly a guild) are [in alarming decline](#), and it is likely that changes to insect populations, whether it be population declines, altered time of hatch or spatial distribution, play a role. Time to pay better attention to insects!
- A sugar bush late in the month is a good place to find spring insects that are attracted to the sweet sap. Bees, ladybugs, [tortoiseshell butterflies \(closed\)](#), flies and moths can all be found. In fact, when pails instead of lines of tubing are used to catch the sap, the presence of [noctuid, or owlet, moths in the sap](#) often marks the end of the sap run.
- Look for returning [Turkey Vultures](#), [American Woodcocks](#), [Belted Kingfishers](#), [Snow Geese](#) and [Sandhill Cranes](#) (on their way through), [Northern Flickers](#) and [Golden-crowned Kinglets](#) (hard to see but you may hear their song, included on website), among many others. Departing are our friends the [Snow Bunting](#), and any northern owls that might have still been hanging around.
- If the end of March is truly mild, you may begin to hear the first [Western Chorus Frogs](#) or [Spring Peepers](#) begin to call.. They and other frogs and toads will really ramp up in April, and we’ll discuss them more then, but a search for frogs around lowlands on a balmy late March night can be a rite of spring (or a good excuse). Consider joining [FrogWatch](#), and add to our information about these amphibians.
- [Wolves](#), [Coyotes](#), [Red Foxes](#) and [Gray Squirrels](#) are beginning to give birth.
- [Earth Hour](#) (8:30–9:30pm) will occur on March 26th. Join the global phenomena of lights being turned off in local communities around the world. Lights down, stars up – not only will you be helping fight [climate change](#), but also helping [migrating birds](#) and [star gazers](#).



Earth Hour: 8:30 PM on  
March 26th 2011

Earth Day– April 22nd  
2011

World Water Day: March  
22nd, 2011