



Nature Guides

It's all in the Song: Understanding Bird Calls

Mid-March

Featured Species: Black-capped Chickadee

Now that bird species are beginning to return, you might be tempted to ignore our old friend the Black-capped Chickadee, but that would be a mistake. Bold and almost ubiquitous across Ontario, they can provide hours of entertainment and learning. Since their name is their call, almost everyone knows it, but there are layers to the typical *chick-a-dee-dee*. It's not only a predator alert – it also indicates urgency and the number of *dees* communicates the level of threat as well. I only rate two *dees* (and they just might be saying, “Finally, the guy with the food!”), but a Northern Saw-whet Owl, small, manoeuvrable, and highly dangerous to chickadees, gets an urgent four (Saw-whet's are currently moving through southern Ontario on their way back north). And this is just one of at least 15 different calls that they make. Here's a vocabulary for eight of them.

Top R4R Picks

Resources for extending the learning

Five Minute Fieldtrips

Elementary, Middle

See Sound Map Activity

Get to Know Your Wild Neighbours

Elementary, Middle

See Mini Lesson 7-Birds

The little guys also exhibit pack behaviour throughout the fall and winter, swooping in to depredate your feeder for a while, and then gone again, covering 8 to 20 hectares along a pretty established route. There is a status ranking, and the higher-ranked birds get first dibs.

Of course, males are now singing their little hearts out, their “Hi, Sweetie's” competing for female attention as the packs sort themselves out into bird pair breeding territories. A good set of pipes isn't the only thing that attracts the ladies. Birds see things in ways we can't – in ultraviolet. Apparently, male chickadees that shine the brightest are the sexiest! Pair bonds may persist for several years, but don't think that means there no infidelity. If the male is bested in a song competition, she might step out for a little mating on the side.

Since chickadees are cavity nesters, pairs will soon be digging out holes in dead, rotting trees, using abandoned nest holes, or occupying small nesting boxes. Eggs will be laid in late April. And since their diet is 80–90% bugs during nesting season, they will act as backyard pest control agents throughout the summer.

All this can be observed with a little patience and a little luck. Here's one amusing, but ultimately tragic, tale of love and loss in the chickadee world. Fortunately, chickadees have an amazing adaptation for not dwelling on the past, for moving on – they forget...literally. Neurons with old information are replaced!

Other Happenings:

- Female Red-winged Blackbirds should be coming into the region soon to join the males. Drab in appearance, she'll be harder to spot, but should stir things up.
- Watch for pairs of Red-tailed Hawks either soaring or roosting together in trees.
- Mid-month bird arrivals include Wood Ducks, Greater Scaup, Eastern Bluebirds, Song Sparrows, Eastern Meadowlarks, and Common Grackles.
- Willow stems are turning yellow-green, bronze or red as they prepare to bud (scroll down on this site to explore

native Willow species). Red Osier Dogwood stems are also turning bright red, and really stand out on the landscape.

- Pussy Willow catkins are starting to appear. The typical “pussy toe” is an early male catkin, or collection of small flowers. They will eventually mature and produce yellow pollen, which will be transferred by wind to the female catkins (willow species are mostly either male or female – “monoecious”). These get longer than the males, with well-developed, small flowers. Eventually, the seeds ripen and appear like a cottony mass. Look for Pussy Willows along stream banks and the margins of wet areas, and follow the process throughout the early Spring. Many willows produce catkins, but the actual plant bearing the Pussy Willow name is a shrubby willow named Salix discolor.
- Can't wait for the full colour of spring any longer? Try bringing clipped tree and shrub twigs inside and into jars of water, “forcing” or “tricking” them into believing its spring. Watching spring unfold up close can provide many learning opportunities. With Silver Maple you get to see the flowers emerge. Sometimes you get a bloom of insects along with the buds! Of course there is forsythia, which is very nice. Try experimenting by bringing twigs in at weekly intervals and comparing the results. What are the differences and why?
- Male Muskrats are truly rambling, ranging over the countryside and attempting to mate with as many females as possible. Watch out for them along roads.
- Other mammals mating during March include Striped Skunks, Groundhogs, Eastern Cottontail Rabbits, Snowshoe Hares, and both Northern and Southern Flying Squirrels.
- Walleye and Northern Pike are clustering near their spawning areas, Walleye in 8–10 m of water near rocky areas exposed to either current or wave action in lakes or rivers, and Northern Pike in lake shallows near beaver lodges, creek mouths and grass beds.
- Leo will dominate the evening Spring sky in the southeast to south, taking the place of Orion, who is preparing to drop below the horizon to the west. Leo actually looks a bit like a lion, with the ‘sickle’ to the right forming the lion’s head. The two stars in the ladle of the Big Dipper closest to the handle can be used as a guide to Regulus, the brightest star in Leo.
- Don't forget that the Spring Equinox will be here on March 20 at 1:32PM (DST), except in the far northwest. We will enjoy longer and longer days until June 21st – summer solstice, the longest day in the year. To exploit the sun's light we will spring forward with daylight savings time on March 14th at 2AM.