

Step Outside: Your Guide to Nature's Events

Nature Guides

Bird Alert: Who's Nesting and Who's Heading North?

Mid-April


Featured Species: Song Sparrow

Song Sparrows are singing around our place – males marking their territories. The name is apt. While the basic song can be interpreted as "maids, maids, maids, put on your tea kettle–ettle–ettle," birds will sing up to 20 different melodies with many improvised variations, but the average male in his territory will sing 8–12 songs. Apparently, the more songs he has, the fitter he is as a mate. Males in nearby, established territories can recognize each other (low threat) and any aggressive intruders (high threat). Males on good terms will sing very similar songs, helping them fit into the neighbourhood, while aggressive males will sing contrasting songs. Birds in noisy urban areas will alter the pitch of their songs (generally fewer low tones) to make them stand out from the background.

These birds are everywhere, from the city to the suburbs to rural areas, absent only in deep forests. They are fairly easy to identify, with a light stripe over the eye and a small, dark patch on their breast, but not always easy to see. Their earth tone stripes match their environment well. They are ground feeders that like shrubby thickets and tall grasses, and can often be found on the margins of developed areas. Letting a corner of the schoolyard go unmowed will improve your chances of having Song Sparrows right at hand. They also nest on or near the ground, so cover is important.

The birds maintain their small (0.2 – 0.6 ha) territories even after mating and raising young, and remain quite vocal about it. Their alarm call is quite distinctive, and they will noisily track predators and other intruders. They don't, however, like to be seen, and will often run along the ground rather than fly when you approach. But if you sit still, or move slowly and quietly, you will have a better chance of seeing them flit around and sing, particularly if they are in territorial mode. They are also cooperative, feeding in conjunction with their mate, a brood mate or offspring, and will maintain contact with companion calls ("jep") and displays. Song Sparrows are scratch feeders, eating a wide range of invertebrates and seeds.

Other Happenings:

- Don't put away the snow shovel yet. A big snowstorm is less unusual for April than all that warm weather we just had. The GTA, for example, *averages* 6 cm of snow for the month, and I'm sure that's on the low side for the province. Find out how much snow you generally get in April.
- Red Squirrels are giving birth, using dreys, nest boxes and tree cavities. Red Squirrel dreys are smaller than those of Gray Squirrels, and made of grass, not leaves.
- The first bats are beginning to fly on mild evenings. These are our hibernators (e.g. Big and Little Brown Bats ) , not our migrators (e.g. Red and Hoary Bats). Females will soon move to nursery sites.
- Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers are arriving, and they and other woodpecker males *and* females will be drumming to establish territory and attract mates. The 'drum roll' tat–tat–tating is just a little different for each species, and has nothing to do with finding food. Perhaps you will be lucky enough to hear one at 5:30 a.m., drumming on your aluminum downspout.

Top R4R Picks

Resources for extending the learning

Get to Know Your Wild Neighbours

Elementary, Middle

See Lesson 7– Birds

Little Brown Bat

Elementary

- [Osprey](#), [Common Grackles](#) and [American Robins](#) are already nesting. And you won't hear those raucous [Blue Jays](#), because they're nesting, too, and don't want to advertise their locations. An increasing number of [Sandhill Cranes](#) are also nesting in south-central Ontario, but some are on their way further north.
- Warblers are moving through, including [Pine](#) and [Yellow-rumped](#), along with [Ruby-crowned Kinglets](#) and [Hermit Thrushes](#). [Dark-eyed Juncos](#) that have overwintered, along with those from further south, are moving north, along with a number of water birds, including: [Snow Geese](#), [Northern Pintails](#), [Greater Scaup](#) (who are staging along the Lake Ontario shoreline eating Zebra Mussels) and [Canvasbacks](#).
- Migrating [Tree Swallows](#) are probably at their peak abundance, many destined for northern regions.
- Canada Geese are laying their [eggs](#). So check out wetland and water margins for the activities of these early spring nesters. At times, they will take over low [Osprey nests](#), and these may have to be screened until the Osprey arrive.
- Both yearling [Beavers](#) and [Muskrats](#) are forced from their natal homes and habitat, wandering broadly in search of new territory. This helps limit the density of these animals across the landscape, and fills in any areas lacking in these enterprising, giant rodents. Watch out for them along roads near wetlands.
- [Rainbow Trout](#), in their '[Steelhead](#)' form, are moving out of the Great Lakes and into the shallow, rocky portions of streams in preparation for spawning. They will [jump](#) over low dams and up [fish ladders](#). Local anglers should know the best spots for viewing. Well worth a short field trip.
- [Walleye](#) are [spawning](#), either in fast-moving streams over gravel and rocks, or over rocky shoals in lakes, beginning when the water temperature reaches 7°C. Spawning takes place mostly at night, and you can see the [shine of the fishes' eyes](#) in the beam of a strong flashlight. [Trout-perch](#) spawn closer to shore in lakes, and [White Suckers](#) will spawn with Walleye in streams.
- Green shoots are appearing, and buds are swelling. In addition to the catkins of late March, look for [Red Maple](#) and [American Elm](#) flowers.