

Spring into Wildlife Watching!

By Tom Adair, Natural Resource Manager
 Photos by John Pogacnik, Biologist

We all enjoy the seasons for their uniqueness and many agree that no season can be as anticipated as spring! After months of shoveling snow, scraping icy windows and mucking around in slush, most of us get excited at the first signs of springtime.

Annual harbingers of spring are a welcome sign as the snow and cold give way to spring showers and warmer days. Robins and trillium are among the first signs of the seasonal shift. Although many "migratory" birds don't actually leave the northern Ohio environs completely, we still anticipate their annual post winter sightings with excitement. And the emergence of once dormant plants from winter slumber (even those with scents as displeasing as skunk cabbage) can awaken a springtime attitude in the casual woodland visitor.

With the arrival of spring comes opportunities for wildlife viewing that if missed, can fade as quickly as our interest in the first snowfall. As wild animals emerge from their slowed metabolic states and spring flowers begin the process of breaching the still cold ground, we are treated to daily rituals of food gathering and mate selection.

Knowing a bit about the parks in Lake County can help you position yourself for some interesting sightings. Just as animals require specific habitats for feeding, rearing young and resting, plants share similar requirements as well. Some springtime plant species need more acidic soils than others. Some plants are only found in protected microhabitats and others may thrive on heavily disturbed slopes along rivers and streams. A simple and inexpensive field guide can offer a great deal of information about an organism's habitat requirements and can help you narrow your searching options.

Field guides are widely available in bookstores, online or in the Nature Store at Penitentiary Glen Nature Center and have become invaluable for wildlife watchers.

Parks like Hogback Ridge Park in Madison, Indian Point Park in Leroy or Chapin Forest



Carolina spring beauty



American robin

Reservation in Kirtland can offer some of the most rewarding opportunities for spring wildflower seeking. From the more elusive Carolina spring beauty to Ohio's state wildflower the white trillium, locating these treasures can turn into a lengthy but satisfying park outing. Girdled Road Reservation offers some spectacular viewing for blooming flowering dogwoods.

Chagrin River Park in Willoughby/Eastlake and Lakeshore Reservation in North Perry are popular stop-over sites for returning migratory birds and Veterans Park in Mentor can be a haven for those wishing to see waterfowl species returning from their winter breaks. Many park wetlands are chosen as nesting areas and visitors to these wetlands and ponds can be treated to the sight of birds pairing up and preparing to move into one of the hundreds of artificial nest structures throughout the county's parks. Mallard nest tunnels, wood duck boxes, purple martin houses, prothonotary warbler boxes and owl boxes can be located and observed in nearly every park.

Sometimes park goes strike it big and witness the emergence of coyote cubs from a winter den or perhaps get to see the more commonly observed ritual of the first woodchuck pups striking out in their new surroundings. Spring is the season of baby animals and there are fewer things more humorous and exciting than witnessing young getting familiar with their new surroundings. It is important to remember: Never touch the animals.

Whatever park you visit and whatever animal or plant you seek, no season brings more anticipation than spring. There are thousands of acres of Lake Metroparks to visit for a glance at wildlife. Field guide in hand and park map in pocket, springtime is your time to witness the wonders of nature!



red-breasted merganser



barn swallow



skunk cabbage



white trillium



tree swallow