



March Flowers, Birds and Other Things

This year, the winter here in Connecticut was warmer than usual with some snow, rain, and plenty of wind. Plants like star magnolias, forsythias and hellebore started to have bud swell early in winter, but finally cold arrived and stopped that. but it should resume in spring as flower buds were generally not damaged.

Our resident birds are starting to sing their spring songs. Turkeys are making their presence known as they go about the serious business of attracting mates. Their fanning of tail feathers and stomping around makes them hard to miss. Woodpeckers are also drumming to attract mates, and red-bellied woodpeckers send out their familiar call advertising what they deem the perfect nesting holes for potential females to check out. They often are inside these holes, just poking their heads out to call. Bald eagles are also mating now.

Eastern garter snakes may be encountered now in sunny woodland areas on warmer days. This native snake can mate in March- early May and gives birth to live young in late June- August. This snake can tolerate cold weather and is commonly seen where there is an abundance of moist vegetation where it will feed on toads, frogs, worms and other creatures.

Lichens are an example of a symbiotic partnership between a fungus and an algae or a cyanobacterium. The fungal part depends upon the other component to survive. Seen on trees, lichens are not damaging to the tree, but are usually indicators of good air quality and perhaps thinning crowns of trees. The rock tripe is a lichen that resembles dead leaves and is found living on rocks. *Umbilicaria mammulata* is the most common rock tripe. Soft and pliable like leather in moist weather, when conditions are dry these leaf-like lichens will shrivel and become quite brittle.

Bracket fungi, or shelf, fungi comprise numerous species of the Polypore Family in the class basidiomycete. These fungi obtain energy through the decomposition of dead and dying plant matter. The visible fruiting body can be long- lived and hard like wood adding a new layer of

living fungal matter at the base of the structure every year. Fungal threads are within the dead or dying woody host where they obtain nutrients.

Woolly bear caterpillars, *Colletes* ground nesting bees and mourning cloak butterflies are a few insects that are active in March. Often seen crawling across lawns in late March, woolly bears are looking to pupate soon, while the *Colletes* are looking for pollen and nectar sources to provide food for their young, which hatch singly in nesting chambers that resemble ant hills. These bees are very non-aggressive and their nesting holes, though numerous, should be left alone. nesting in

Early flowering plants are a good source of pollen and nectar for bees. These include the Japanese andromeda, native bloodroot, spring flowering witch hazel native spicebush, willows, daffodils, crocus and dandelions.

As you walk around yards, gardens, parks and trails, check out stalks of plants and small branches of shrubs for mantid eggs cases. These eggs masses resemble tan styrofoam and mantids should hatch by mid-May, depending upon weather. Katydid eggs are easy to spot on twigs, lined up like little pancakes. Katydids are not harmful to plants, so leave eggs to hatch.

Native sweet ferns, *Comptonia peregrina*, start to bloom early. These aromatic small shrubs are members of the bayberry family and can be found in dry open woods where there are sandy, acid soils. They are a good spreading plant for difficult dry soils and slopes, and they are one of the host plants for the gray hairstreak butterfly.

The days are warming up and soon the landscapes will be full of color. But even when it is not so bright and cheery outside, as Charles Dickens wrote ‘ Nature gives to every time and season some beauties of its own’

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