



10

Signs of Spring



Grab your notebook or smartphone and observe the world around you as the weather begins to warm.

WHEN YOU wake from a good night's sleep, do you leap out of bed ready to go, or do you take your time before getting up? When nature awakes from a long winter's nap, it's a gradual process. As the sun appears higher in the sky and the amount of daylight increases, water turns from ice or snow to flowing liquid. Plants and animals take their cues from these early signs of spring to blossom, build nests, and otherwise get ready for a busy summer season of growing and reproducing more of their kind.

The change from winter to spring shows that nature is never bored—or boring—as shifts in temperature and light affect plants and animals around us. The study of seasonal changes

throughout the year has a name: *phenology*. When Minnesota welcomes springtime, many people who live here like to track the dates when spring-y things start to happen.

You can be a phenologist this spring, too. One way is to keep a notebook and record the changes you observe day by day. Another way is to write spring happenings on a calendar. You can even share your observations with others at journeynorth.org, a website that tracks seasonal events across North America. It can be fun to compare the dates from year to year and from place to place.

Here are 10 fun spring things to watch (and listen!) for as Minnesota warms up.

RICHARD HAMILTON SMITH

By Mary Hoff



1. Black-Capped Chickadee “Fee-bee” Call

When to keep an ear out: Starting in January

ONE OF THE earliest audible signs that spring is just around the corner in Minnesota is the late-winter call of the chickadee. Chickadees live in our state all winter long, protected from the cold by fluffy down beneath their outer feathers and energy from seeds they find in nature and in people’s backyard feeders. For most of the cold season you can hear their “chick-a-dee-dee-dee” call echoing through the crisp air.

But starting as early as January, you might hear something else: A high-pitched “fee-bee” call. It’s likely a male chickadee getting ready for breeding season. This special call lets females know he’s interested in them. It also lets other males know to stay out of his business. Each chickadee’s “fee-bee” call is unique. Other chickadees can tell who is singing, and how powerful the singer is, by what they hear.



2. Red-Winged Blackbird “Kon-ka-reee” Call

When to keep an ear out: Starting in February

THE BOISTEROUS CALL of a red-winged blackbird is a sure sign that spring has come to Minnesota. This common bird is often found in wetlands and along roadsides. Although some may stay in southern Minnesota all winter, many fly to the southern United States for the cold months. In early spring, migratory blackbirds make their way north again for breeding season. Males, which are black except for a patch of red and yellow feathers on their wings, migrate first. When they find a suitable

spot to spend the summer, they defend it from other red-winged blackbirds by flying from one spot to another, announcing their presence with a loud “kon-ka-reee” call while flaring out their wings. When females arrive, they look for nesting sites near the water within a male bird’s territory. The females weave a cozy nest of grass, mud, and other soft materials. One male may partner with several females nesting within his territory. Together they raise two to four young.

RICHARD HAMILTON SMITH



ALLEN BLAKE SHELDON

3. Snow Flea

When to keep an eye out: Warm days in winter but more commonly starting in March

FAR BENEATH the surface of the snow, hundreds of dark blue insect-like creatures half the size of a grain of rice lie dormant in dead leaves. As the weather warms, some work their way to the surface. Known as snow fleas, these tiny beings have no wings. Instead, they propel themselves by snapping a forked taillike structure called a *furcula*. Snow fleas' ability to catapult themselves several inches through the air has earned them another

name: springtail. Even though the “flea” part of their moniker might make you (or your dog) feel itchy, snow fleas are harmless to humans. And they’re extremely helpful to nature. By decomposing dead leaves and other organic material, they help make nutrients available for new plant growth in spring. Watch for snow fleas on the surface of soft snow on sunny, warm days all winter long, but particularly in March.



STANTEKIELA

4. Boreal Chorus Frog “Creeee” Call

When to keep an ear out: Starting in March

AS ICE MELTS off ponds and wetlands, Minnesota’s smallest frog, the inch-long boreal chorus frog, wakes from its winter nap beneath dead leaves and makes its way to a pond or wetland. There, male chorus frogs fill their throat pouches with air, creating an echo chamber

that amplifies their call—a loud, rising “creeee” that some people say sounds like the sound you can make by running your fingernail across the teeth of a comb. Females listen to the chorus and make their way to the male of their choice to mate.

How DOES Nature Know?

It can be 60 degrees in January. It can snow in May. How do plants and animals know when it’s really spring? The biggest clue is the amount of time between sunrise and sunset. Because the axis on which the Earth

spins each day is tilted relative to its yearly path around the sun, the northern hemisphere gets gradually more darkness than daylight from September to April, and gradually more daylight than darkness from

April until September. Plants and animals use the longer daylight as a cue that spring has arrived. The springtime increase in sunlight brings on average more warmth, too—another important clue.

5. Silver Maple Flower

When to keep an eye out: March–April

SILVER MAPLE blossoms are one of the earliest signs of spring among Minnesota trees. As the ground thaws, sugary sap rises from the roots of the tree through tubes in the trunk to the tallest branches. The energy the sap provides allows the tree to produce flowers. As the weather warms, look up at the crown of the tree every few days. One day, the branches will appear to have reddish bulges on the tips. Your tree is about bloom!



MN DNR



RICHARD HAMILTON SMITH

6. Sandhill Crane Arrival

When to keep an eye out: March–April

STANDING UP TO 5 feet tall, sandhill cranes are among Minnesota's biggest birds. A hundred years ago they almost disappeared from Minnesota. A law protecting migratory birds and an increase in open spaces helped bring them back. Although many sandhill cranes spend the winter in southern

Minnesota, some fly south to the Gulf of Mexico for the cold season. When they return, you can hear their bugling call as they fly overhead. You might also see a second migration in late May or early June as birds without families fly farther north to Canada to spend the summer.



7. Dandelion Bud/Blossom

When to keep an eye out: Starting in April

SOME PEOPLE LOVE dandelions because their bright yellow blossoms bring cheer to springtime. Others see them as weeds that invade lawns and spread silky seeds everywhere. Love them or hate them, dandelions are here to stay. Native to Europe and central Asia, they came to North America with European settlers and quickly spread across the continent. Even though dandelions are not native to Minnesota, native bees use them as a source of nutrient-rich pollen. They're good for people, too—their leaves and

blossoms are edible and provide bountiful nutrients, including vitamin C and iron. And dandelions thrive in all kinds of conditions, from soggy summers to dry droughts. Dandelions' spiky leaves earned them their name, which roughly means "lion's tooth." When the flowers turn to seed, children often pick and blow on them to watch the seeds scatter to the wind. A single flower can contain up to 20,000 seeds. Dandelions usually begin blooming in mid-April in Minnesota and continue throughout the summer.

STAN TEKIELA



RICHARD HAMILTON SMITH

8. Pussy Willow Blossom

When to keep an eye out: April–May

A FAVORITE SIGN of spring for many is the appearance of rows of furry “pussy toes” on the ends of the branches of this wetland willow. Named because they look a little like a cat’s feet, these silvery balls of fuzz are actually male flowers

just beginning to emerge. Pussy willows grow in damp soil at the edges of ponds, in road ditches, and near wetlands. The pollen and nectar that their flowers produce provide food for hungry bees in spring.

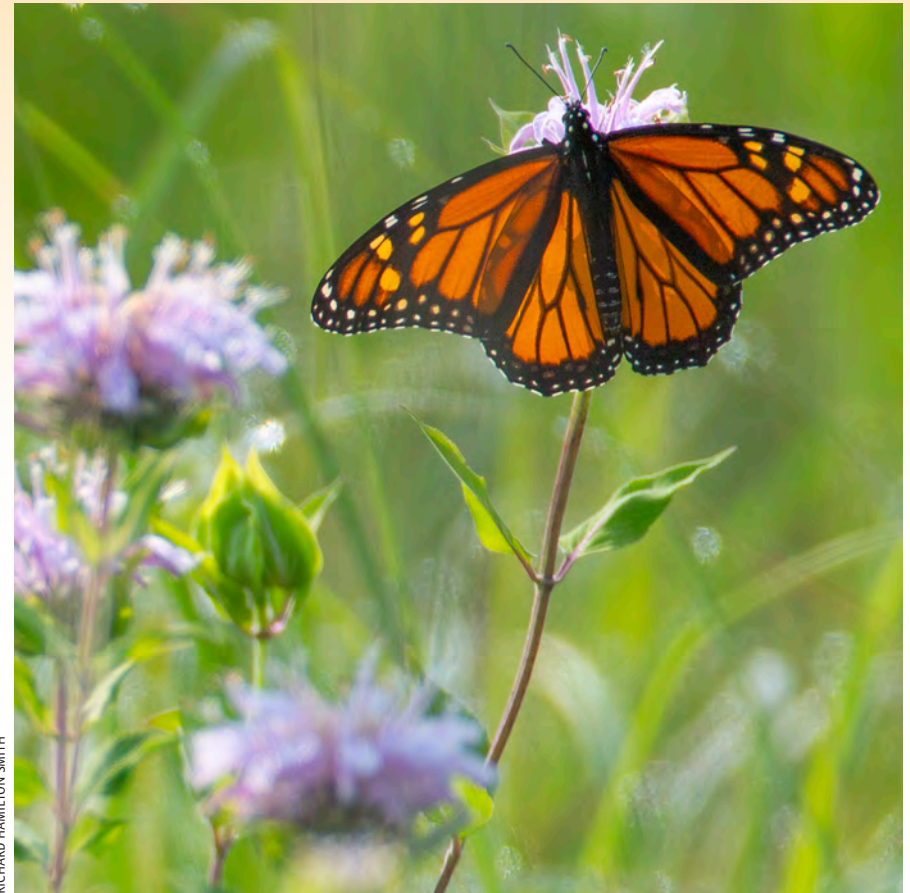
9. Morel Mushroom

When to keep an eye out: April–June

DID YOU KNOW that Minnesota has an official state mushroom? It’s the morel—yet another sign that spring is officially here. Morels live year-round underground in the form of threads known as *mycelium*. But sometimes after a late-spring rain, they emerge above the surface of the soil in the form of elongated, wrinkly beige or yellowish mushrooms. Look for morels around the base of dying elms or other hardwood trees in southern Minnesota in April or May, and in northern Minnesota into June.



STAN TEKIELA



RICHARD HAMILTON SMITH

10. Monarch Butterfly

When to keep an eye out: Starting in May

MINNESOTA HAS A state butterfly, too—the monarch. Unlike most other insects, monarch butterflies migrate to Mexico rather than spending the winter here in a dormant state. In spring, the butterflies head north again, but they don’t make it

all the way to Minnesota. They stop in the southern United States to lay eggs, then die. The eggs hatch into larvae, which eventually *metamorphose* into the butterflies that continue the journey north. Watch for the first monarchs to arrive in mid-May. ✓

TEACHERS RESOURCES. Find a Teachers Guide and other resources for this and other Young Naturalists stories at mndnr.gov/young_naturalists.

MARCH–APRIL 2025