



The Ferrum Nature Society Bulletin

Dedicated to the appreciation and conservation of our natural world

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The birds are back in town!



Birds that spend their winters in the tropics or the deep South start returning *en force* this month. Some are just passing through on their way North, but others will be busy setting up breeding territories, such as the Wood Thrush (above). Along with the birds come the “bugs”. Watch out for ticks, chiggers, and those pesky carpenter bees (below)!



Sky calendar:

Full moon - April 20.

Planets - Saturn, Mars, and Jupiter are close to the moon this month.

Lyrid meteor shower

Focused on the constellation Lyra, this meteor shower peaks on April 21 and will not be easy to see given its coincidence with the full moon.

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The Secretive Spotted Salamander Matthew Boyes

The Spotted Salamander (*Ambystoma maculatum*) is a large salamander reaching lengths of 6-9 inches. The adult salamander has a black, bluish-gray ground color and two rows of round yellow or orange spots running from the tip of its head all the way down their tail. The spots are usually well-rounded and do not run together. Some Spotted Salamanders have two bright orange spots on the top of their head that stand out against the bright yellow spots on the body and tail. In adults, the bottom lip and throat are light gray. They also have 11-13 coastal grooves and there are four toes on the front feet and five toes on the back feet. The sides of the salamander are usually unspotted and the belly is grayish to purplish.

The Spotted Salamander is one of the most secretive salamanders in North America. Most of their time is spent underground in burrows or under rotted logs or leaf litter. The only time they are found aboveground in numbers are during heavy spring and fall rains while they migrate to and from breeding sites. The Spotted Salamander prefers mature, moist wetlands with access to vernal ponds for breeding. The vernal ponds are free of fish and are best for breeding because of reduced predation on eggs and larvae.

This carnivorous salamander only feeds on insects, worms, slugs, spiders, and millipedes or anything else it can swallow. The salamander secretes a noxious, milky toxin from glands on their backs and tails to dissuade predators. The spotted salamander emerges only at night to feed on its prey.



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Vernal pools are fishless ponds that provide critical breeding habitat for Spotted Salamanders

Spotted Salamanders breed in the early spring, but slightly later than some other amphibian breeders. The adults migrate to the breeding ponds during warm spring rains, or humid nights if there is no rain. The males court the females by nudging and rubbing them with their snouts. Spotted Salamanders return to the same mating pool by the same route every year. The female is fertilized when she walks over a spermatophore and picks it up with her cloacal lips. Breeding usually lasts from a couple of nights to over a week. The female lays 1 to 200 eggs in a globular mass which is covered by a jelly-like coating. This prevents some predators from eating the eggs. The eggs hatch in 20 to 60 days and remain aquatic larvae for 2 to 4 months. Once they emerge as juveniles, it may take from two to five years for them to reach sexual maturity (adults).

Return of the Ruby-throated Hummingbird

Rod White

The Ruby-throated Hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*) is one of the most common species of hummingbirds in eastern North America and the only one that is native to our area. The bird gets its name from the male's red-colored band around its neck. Hummingbirds are extremely territorial and will fight for food sources. These fights can often be seen at close range at bird feeders as hummingbirds quickly become comfortable with human presence.

The Ruby-throated Hummingbird's extremely short legs prevent it from walking or hopping effectively, but once the bird takes flight, it's a different story. The bird flaps its wings approximately 53 times per second - that's about 3,180 times per minute! This rapid wing movement makes it exceptionally agile in the air, allowing it to perform more difficult maneuvers such as hovering or flying upside down and backwards.



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In addition to being one of the more interesting birds to watch in the air, the Ruby-throated Hummingbird is also one of the most appealing to the eye. The males have a vibrant red patch around the throat. Younger males and females lack this red coloration, but all hummingbirds boast a colorful metallic green back coloring.

The Ruby-throated Hummingbird is an exciting bird to watch whether it is feeding or performing an acrobatic aerial show. These tiny birds will return in mid-April from their wintering areas in tropical America. They will often arrive hungry, having migrated nearly non-stop, including a long flight over the Gulf of Mexico. Be sure to have your hummingbird feeders ready!

Red Maple Colors the Early Spring Landscape

McCray Foley and Todd Fredericksen

Red Maple (*Acer rubrum*) is also known as the scarlet maple, soft maple, and swamp maple. It is a native to the Appalachian area and can also be found in parts of the eastern U.S. and Canada. This is a tree species that most everyone can say that they have seen because one cannot miss the red coloration of the forest this time of year. The red flowers that bloom during March and into early April provide the first hint of spring color. The brilliant red foliage of this species in the fall produces a similarly spectacular display. Even outside the more dramatic display times of red coloration, the young twigs of the tree are colored with red. There is something red on the Red Maple at all times of the year.

Unlike the Sugar Maple (*Acer saccharum*), red maple produces seeds that ripen in Spring. The leaves of the Red Maple also tend to be three-lobed and often have a whitish coloration on the underside, whereas the leaves of Sugar Maple have five major lobes and lack the whitish coloration beneath. The Red Maple has a much larger geographic range and more diverse site tolerances than Sugar Maple. In our area, Sugar Maple is rare in natural forests, being restricted to the coolest and moistest sites.

The bark of the younger Red Maple trees is a light grey color and has a smooth texture. As they mature, the trees turn a dark grey or an almost black color and have scaly ridges. The size of the tree varies by location, but it commonly grows up to 90 feet tall and the crown may extend to about 60 feet wide.

Red Maple has increased in abundance in our landscape for many reasons. First, while the tree produces valuable wood, it is susceptible to rot and stem deformities that often allow it to remain in a selectively logged forests. In addition, the tree has benefited from decades of fire suppression. Forest fires tend to negatively affect species, such as Red Maple, that do not have thick bark. Furthermore, the species is not a preferred food for deer or the Gypsy Moth (*Lymantria dispar*) caterpillars. Relatively free from these controlling forces, the Red Maple continues to spread prolifically through seed and sprouting.



Todd Fredericksen