

Watching for wildlife

March mildness means wildlife are on the move



By Katharine Fletcher

It's hard to believe but already, by March, some birds that migrate to the Ottawa Valley from northern Canada so as to enjoy our milder winters have already started to leave.

Meanwhile, non-migratory mammals which hibernate (or become dormant) overwinter are starting to stir.

This means that March is an interesting time to be out and about in the Ottawa Valley.

Watch for snowy owls

By mid-March, most of the snowy owls visiting the Ottawa Valley will either have left or be readying to migrate north. Just like their cousins the great gray owl, they are northern species. Whereas the great gray spends summer in the northern boreal forest, snowy owls live in the Arctic during summer.

These white, speckled owls are among the most dramatic of our Valley avian visitors. It always seems amazing to me that any living creature can live outside during our harsh winters – and not perish. How do snowy owls find enough prey to eat on a long winter's day and night? Somehow they survive, managing through patience to pounce upon a hapless mouse, shrew or other morsel which sustains them. And what's even more remarkable is that both snowy and great gray owls invade our resident owls' winter territory. This must mean that at least usually there is enough prey for all. Nonetheless, the ability of a given territory to expand to allow additional predators to survive alongside resident species such as great horned and barred owls is fascinating.

The best place to look for snowy owls is in the countryside (they are not urban dwellers): in fact, they are most likely observed perched on top of hydro or other

poles, along back-country roads. They are not woodland species: instead, here in the Valley they will more likely be seen in the open countryside, in farmers' fields, where they can see movement and quickly pounce upon their prey.

Horned larks

Again in early March, look for smaller birds known as horned larks which arrive here in the Ottawa Valley in late February, already migrating home en route to more northerly climes. They are best observed on the shoulders of country roads where they are picking up gravel for their crop, or searching for food in the increasingly exposed stubble of last season's cornfield. Why are they called "horned," you sensibly ask?

No, they don't have horns like a cow! Instead, horned larks have two sweeping sets of delicately curved feathers on either side of their head. Because the black feathers sweep down and then up, in an upside-down crescent, their tips extend up, resembling "horns."

Seeing bird migrants

Soon they, too will be gone, heading north. If you wish to spy these two species, now is the time to head out to try to find them. Tip: Ensure you know what you're looking for. Borrow a bird identification book from the library or else search the Internet so you know what these two birds look like. Then, pack a lunch and a thermos and head out in your car to the countryside. Where to go? Try heading into West Quebec's Pontiac region. I've seen horned larks along the roads in Luskville, the little town located west of Aylmer, south of Highway 148. Once you are in the countryside, leave the highway behind by driving onto some of the back roads. Take field glasses, be patient, and you may spy horned larks busily patrolling the graveled shoulders of roads, where last year's grasses are starting to show in the melting snow.

Mammals stirring

Mammals such as red squirrels are becoming increasingly active. Although they don't hibernate for the entire winter, just like other species such as porcupines and black bears, red squirrels will be more visible from now on until next winter's arrival.

When you're snowshoeing, skiing or taking the children to a maple sugar bush later on this month, if you're in a woodland setting, keep your eyes and ears open

for these cheeky critters who will regularly “scold you” with a saucy “ch, ch, ch!” as you pass by. Red squirrels are easily identified: their small size and glossy chestnut brown fur gives them their name. They are far smaller than their grey or black cousins, too.

Wherever you go in the countryside, encourage your kids to keep their eyes and ears at the ready: you never know what you’ll see. Look for tracks (and perhaps find a good track identification guide, too) and see if you and your children can, just like detectives, interpret nature’s clues.

Spring migrants returning

Soon, the migratory pathways will start to be used again by returning birds which will immediately start to establish territories, find mates, build nests, lay eggs and raise their young prior to leaving for the south next autumn. What an amazing life cycle!

Migration is fascinating: March is an excellent time to introduce kids to this worldwide phenomenon which we can witness here, simply by stepping outside and listening and watching for the great Vs of honking, returning Canada geese...

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This article originally appeared in the March 2010 issue of Capital Parent Newspaper.