

Spring Rain

We humans are odd creatures. We fixate on the beginnings and endings of things so much that we even feel the need to impose our contrived schedules on Nature itself. We are driven by an unexplainable urge to categorize things, and we cannot rest until we have everything sorted out. The problem for us is the fact that Nature marches to its own beat. This keeps us unsettled, literally restless, and it may be a contributing factor to our amazing achievements as a species. Nature keeps us moving.

Take, for instance, the notion of spring. The very sound of the word evokes powerful images in our minds. We think of warmer temperatures that allow the perfume of damp earth to waft on the breeze. We think of every pigment on Nature's palette strewn across verdant fields in a riot of color. We think of the collective voice of the avian fugue rejoicing in the aftermath of winter. But the riot takes time to muster itself, and the fugue needs time to clear its collective throat. Spring is a work in progress, but we humans are driven to constrain it. We need to announce an opening date, whether it is accurate or not, and so we decided on the vernal equinox. Most years this is March 20, but leap years do cause their problems and they force the opening of spring to be delayed until March 21.

The problem with assigning an arbitrary date to such a fluid season is the fact that despite our planning, organizing, and scheduling, we don't know when spring will actually arrive. Spring is a diva, and she will not be rushed. She will appear in her own good time, but she will send many a tantalizing clue

that she is on her way. Rather than just winking into view, she will ever so seductively materialize into existence. Long after we have seen her face and heard her voice for the first time, we will suddenly realize that she has been with us for quite a while.

I mentioned earlier that spring was a fluid season, and that was no accident. Spring is best identified with liquid water. After the biting cold of the long dark winter has solidified all but the swiftest-flowing waters, spring surrounds the landscape in the merciful warmth of her embrace and allows the waters to begin to soften. It starts out slowly, as it does every year, and then it grows. I'd like to say that my awareness of this phenomenon is due to my own personal intellect, but that would be boasting just a little too much. There are always signs that spring is on her way, but like the first few drops of spring meltwater, it is often difficult to identify these signs as part of the great spring flood that is to follow.

In January the owls start singing. There are three species of owls that call my neighborhood home, but in January I will hear



Ripples spread as a gentle rain falls on a rural pond.

only the great horned owl. Why is this? Well, there are actually two reasons. First, there is the simple interaction of the effects of weather on the observer (that would be me). Great horned owls are big birds with loud, deep voices—so deep and so loud that you can even hear them from inside your house. Since winter is cold enough to keep most people inside at night (including me), it stands to reason that I'd hear a great horned owl and not necessarily the others. This is the easiest explanation for the owl songs I hear in January.

Much more complicated is the fact that owls start their courtship in mid winter. This may seem amazingly early for such an event, but it must be remembered that owls tend to be rather large birds, and they require more time to mature than any of the small migratory birds that we are more familiar with. The largest of the owls—the great horned owls—have the most growing to do, so the parents start courting in January. Owls don't really build nests so much as they refurbish the preexisting nests of crows and hawks, so they only need about a week to get things in order. Eggs are laid at the beginning of February, and then the great gamble commences.

Owls understand that spring is a fickle flirt. They know that the prediction of her arrival is not something that can be done with any great precision, so they hedge their bets. Unlike robins or cardinals, warblers or catbirds, owls incubate their eggs in such a manner as to produce a staggered hatching event. This is achieved simply by incubating eggs as soon as they are laid. Robins and cardinals nest so much later in the season that they can afford to lay eggs and leave them unincubated until the last egg of the clutch is in place. Smaller birds produce eggs once a day, so the first egg may be left for several days, in stasis, before incubation finally begins. Once the final egg is laid, incubation commences and will not be interrupted until all of the babies hatch out at basically the same time. Owls do not have this luxury, however. Unattended eggs would surely freeze, so they must be kept warm at all times to protect the embryos within. Owls also don't necessarily lay an egg every day. So by the time the first egg hatches, there may be many days to go before the last baby emerges from its shell.

This is all because no one can truly predict the arrival of spring. The staggered hatching of owlets from their eggs is an insurance policy against bad timing. Little owls that hatch into a world that is still cold and snowy may not survive, whereas their younger siblings, still safe in the confines of their shells, will be spared. Sometimes a week can make a big difference and the babies that hatch out later will find the world a nicer place to be. The slightly smaller barred owls will compensate for their shorter growing times and wait until the beginning of March to start laying eggs. The little screech owls will wait until the end of March, after the human observance of the beginning of spring, to lay their eggs. All three species are attempting to time the greatest hunger of their new families to coincide with the greatest abundance of baby mammals that will fill the landscape. Even for owls, March seems too soon for spring.

Sooner or later, the cold will start to subside and the snows will start to disappear. The drip, drip, drip of meltwater is the herald of spring, but the first spring rain is her fanfare. Many of spring's actors start to take the stage long before her full glory is established, and each of them is like a drop of water melting off the landscape. The grackles appear . . . drip. The red-winged blackbirds appear . . . drip. The brown-headed cowbirds appear . . . drip. The flood is not fully formed, but you can sense it building. The turkey vultures appear . . . drip, drip. The mallards start pairing off and exploring every little puddle they can find . . . drip, drip. The skunk cabbage flowers poke their heads out above ground . . . drip, drip. The flood is beginning to take shape, but it is still little more than a trickle.

Then I hear the season's first killdeer calling from the lower field . . . gurgle. The crows start building nests in the shelter of spruces and pines . . . gurgle. And, as always, there will eventually come that special night when I hear the call of a woodcock from my lower field . . . gurgle, gurgle. But this is all preamble. This is the equivalent of listening to an orchestra warm up before a performance, and this cannot start without the establishment of rhythm—the rhythm of raindrops falling from the sky and hitting first ice, but later the softer surface of open water.

Without that first spring rain you cannot hope to start the arpeggio that is the arrival of spring.

As a naturalist I spend a great deal of my time making the sorts of observations that keep me well informed of this rhythm, and many years ago I started keeping a field journal of the events of every season in every year. Looking through them from time to time allows me to keep my expectations realistic; to allow myself patience in the face of a fashionably late spring, and to avoid outright panic in those years when spring is unquestionably tardy. I see words printed on the page and I feel that I can trust them because, after all, I wrote them. I don't always manage to make the same kinds of observations every year, because my life is just as fluid as Nature itself, but there was one year when I managed to capture the essence of the first spring rain in words. I shall now take those few phrases and expand upon them in an effort to convey to you the sights and sounds of that day—to create a sense of place, as it were.

For me, the epitome of spring rains fell in Altamont, New York, on April 17, 2007. I woke up that morning to a gray sky that made no false promises of sunshine. It was already raining, and I could see a thin layer of fog above the snow in my field. The rain was not particularly heavy; in fact it was so gentle as to be almost comforting. The world was quiet, but there were signs that it was starting to stir.

I ate a quick breakfast, grabbed my camera, and got into my car. This was not a morning for the radio, so I cracked my windows and headed slowly down the road with only the occasional cycle of the wipers to keep me company. It reminded me so much of similar car trips from my early childhood; happy, quiet, and contemplative. I traced the track of a raindrop down the window with my finger as I had so often done as a boy.

I was on the lookout for anything, but not anything in particular. Nature is everywhere around us, but we still have to be in the right place at the right time. As it happened that morning, the right place was a small, secluded pond that I had never noticed before. In this case, it was the last remnants of the winter ice that caught my eye.

I brought my car to a stop, backed up just a little, and then pulled off to the side of the road. I scanned the woods with my binoculars and found that there was indeed a small pond hidden among the trees. Shielded from the road by a hedge of honeysuckle and raspberry bushes during the summer, the pond was impossible to see until the leaves dropped and let the secret out. Still, even then I managed to drive by this spot many times without noticing there was water just a little ways off the road.

There was still ice on the water, covering perhaps one third of the pond's surface area, and the rest of the pond was mostly water. The rain was gentle enough that I could see the individual halos of expanding waves sent out by the raindrops. Near the edge of the ice the halos slowed, interfered with by little slushy icebergs that had broken free. No Titanic would ply these waters, so the little bergs offered nothing more than accent to the scene; winter was losing its grip, but very slowly.

I was almost ready to put the car in gear and resume my search when a slight movement caught my eye. It took me a minute to figure out what it was I was looking at, but all of a sudden I realized that the little pond was serving as refuge and rest stop for a pair of hooded mergansers. Both birds were snoozing with bills snugly tucked under wings and both were ever so slowly drifting through the slushy margins of the water where it met the ice. Perhaps my notion that no Titanics plied these waters was a bit premature, though they certainly seemed in no danger of sinking.

I lowered the passenger side window and rested my lens on the door. I knew that there was absolutely no way I could get out of the car without scaring the mergansers, so I did my best to find a clear spot through the naked branches between me and my subjects before I snapped a photo. The end effect was one of very soft focus and the picture managed to capture the dark, introspective quality of the day. I visited the same little pond every day for the following week, but never saw the mergansers there again. I guess I just got lucky.

After taking the pictures of the mergansers I decided that it was time to continue. I put the car in gear, slowly moved off the snowy margin, and decided it was time to look for open water.

This turned out to be much easier than I had expected because the temperatures had been relatively steady and warm for a few weeks and all of the local lakes were at least partially free of ice. In less than twenty minutes I found myself parked beside an extensive body of water known as the Watervliet Reservoir. The water in this impoundment is always somewhat murky, but it is a magnet for waterfowl in the springtime. I was sure that there would be something worth seeing there that day, but I had no idea that I would be making my inaugural annual visit to this site to observe ring-necked ducks.

It took me about two seconds to realize that I was seeing something for the first time. These birds were vaguely familiar looking, but there was something that just didn't seem to add up. They clearly weren't buffleheads or goldeneyes, but they did look quite a bit like scaups. I supposed scaups were possible at that time of year, but there was just something about that identification that still didn't sit right. Rather than get too carried away with what the ducks were, however, I decided to focus my attention on taking photographs and worry about identifying them at a later time. I took several rolls of pictures that first day, and in subsequent years I have returned to the same spot and taken hundreds of digital photos. It's always amazing how a once unknown species of wildlife can become a regular and routine part of anyone's wildlife observations once you know when and where to look for it.

That first encounter with the ducks will always be special. I spent more than two hours sitting in a parked car in the rain with no engine running. When there were no cars in close proximity on the highway that runs past the reservoir, I could hear that light hissing sound of a gentle rain falling into water that so very closely resembles the sound of bacon frying in a pan. In addition to the ring-necked ducks I also saw mallards, common mergansers, Canada geese, and even a few northern pintails way off in the distance. When it was finally time to go, I turned the engine over, put the jeep in gear, and made my way home through the back roads to the comforting rhythm of the wipers.