

Field Notes -- March 17, 2024  
Carrie Crompton

For years now, I've been dipping into Thoreau's journals to compare my experiences of the natural year with his. When I hear my first phoebe of the year, I wonder: When did Thoreau hear the same sound?

The alternation of reading Thoreau's observations and recording my own has turned into a sort of silent conversation that's always running in the back of my mind. He wrote copious field notes for a decade, between 1851 and 1861, the year he died. His Concord of 160 years ago was different from my Andover, but the natural world hasn't changed so much that we have nothing to talk about!

### **Thoreau, March 10, 1853**

*Methinks the first obvious evidence of spring is the pushing out of the swamp willow catkins, then the relaxing of the earlier alder catkins, then the pushing up of skunk-cabbage spathes. This is the order I am inclined to, though perhaps any of these may take precedence of all the rest in any particular case.*

### **Carrie, March 10, 2024**

Methinks we look for the same early signs of spring in March. Perhaps "swamp willow" is your name for "pussy willow"? I've seen pussy willows (*Salix discolor*) blooming down by the Hop River this week. As for the alder catkins, I find both smooth alder and speckled alder, side by side, at the edges of Bishop Swamp. They are distinguishable (to me) by the direction in which the small female catkins grow – upward for smooth (*Alnus serrulata*) and downward for speckled (*A. incana*) – and by a slight difference in the color of the scales (more red in the smooth alder, greenish-gold in the speckled). They opened this year just before the March lion blew in on March 11 – perfect timing to let their pollen fly!



**Smooth alder catkins in prime bloom; speckled alder, both March 10, 2024**

I've also been watching the skunk cabbage (*Symplocarpus foetidus*) spathes pushing up to the surface of still water. The spathes were well up by March 3, but I didn't see any golden pollen shining inside until March 12.



**Skunk cabbage shedding pollen in a sunny spot at Blackledge Falls, March 12**

**Thoreau, March 26, 1857:**

*The first croaking frogs, the hyla, the white maple blossoms, the skunk-cabbage and the alder's catkins are observed about the same time.*

**Carrie, March 15, 2024:**

This year, the order for me has been: alders shedding pollen; skunk cabbage shedding pollen; wood frogs croaking; peepers (hyla) peeping, all within a span of six days (March 10-15). I always hear the wood frogs a little ahead of the peepers. This year, it was wood frogs on March 12, peepers on March 15. I notice that you heard wood frogs on March 15 in 1861.

**Thoreau, March 18, 1860:**

*You see a fly come forth from its hibernaculum in your yard, stretch its wings in the sun, and set forth on its flowery journey. You little think that it knows the locality of early flowers better than you. . . . It knows a spot a mile off under a warm bank-side where the skunk-*

*cabbage is in bloom. No doubt this flower, too, has learned to expect its winged visitor knocking at its door in the spring.*

**Carrie, March 15, 2024:**

I noticed flies emerging from the sandy soil at the edge of the yard on March 8. It was 54°, the first warm day. I found a crowd of them on the opposite side of the yard, where the vernal witch-hazel that George and I planted last spring was in full bloom. I brought out a lawn chair to enjoy the spicy scent of the flowers in the mild air. Although I'm not fond of flies, they were a new sign of life and motion in the landscape, and I enjoyed watching their focused search for nectar and pollen. There were dozens of them, representing several different species, I think, on the shrub for just a few hours. As the direct sunlight turned to shade, the flowers stopped emitting their fragrance and the flies disappeared. Did they go back into the ground to wait for another warm day?



**First flies of the season, March 8, 2024**



Thoreau, you mention seeing honeybees in March (March 18, 1860), and conclude that they, like the flies, must be feasting on skunk cabbage pollen, but you never mention the native cellophane bees. I suspect you didn't notice them! I saw them for the first time in my life last spring, when I noticed hundreds of little tumuli, like ant hills, in the sandy soil at the back of Townsend Cemetery. It was early April then; mating season had begun, and the female cellophane bees had already started excavating the tunnels where they would lay their eggs. Today the Andromeda was blooming in our yard, so I went to see if any bees had noticed. Yes! There were at least thirty male cellophane bees (*Colletes inaequalis*) flying madly (silently – not buzzing) about the shrub. It was hard to get a photo; the bees were too busy to pose for me. I believe they had just emerged from the nest holes their mothers excavated last April, and were just discovering life aboveground – learning to smell, see, fly, navigate. I hunkered down to inhale the vanilla fragrance of the nectar the warmth of the sunlight and watch them. Eventually, one bee settled on a leaf for a portrait.



**Male cellophane bee (*Colletes inaequalis*) on Andromeda, March 14, 2024**

By 5:00 p.m., the temperature was dropping. The bees disappeared. I figure they went back to their emergence holes, but didn't witness that. Two days later, I found numerous tumuli in the cemetery that had not been there forty-eight hours earlier.





**Freshly excavated cellophane bee nest hole, March 16, 2024**

**Thoreau, March 18, 1853:**

*I no sooner step out of the house than I hear the bluebirds in the air, and far and near, everywhere except in the woods.*

**Carrie, March 15, 2024:**

Your life was richer in bluebirds than mine! For you, the bluebird was a dependable migrant who disappeared in the fall and reappeared in late February or early March. When I was a child in the 1960s, they were rare – they had nearly disappeared in the first half of the twentieth century, thanks to the introduction of the European starling in 1890. They've been coming back steadily since people started setting out nests with openings specifically sized for bluebirds. George set out two houses a couple of years ago, and we had a breeding pair last spring. Now I see a small flock year round at our suet feeder. Would they migrate if we didn't provide suet in the winter? I'm not sure. But I do notice that in March, the plumage of the males becomes an almost electric blue. And as of today, they're calling and chirping for the first time this year. I think their mating season is beginning.





**Male bluebirds in our yard, March 16, 2024**

The goldfinches are also developing their breeding-season plumage; the males are showing patchy color on their backs, sides, and flanks pretty much on schedule – I have noted this change every mid-March for many years.

As for the return of the phoebe? Thoreau had two names for it – phoebe and pewee.

**Thoreau, April 2, 1852:**

*For a long distance, as we paddle up the river, we hear the two-stanza'd lay of the pewee on the shore – pee-wet, pee-wee, etc. Those are the two obvious facts to eye and ear, the river and the pewee.*

**Thoreau, April 1, 1856:**

*I see my first phoebe, the mild bird. It flirts its tail and sings pre vit, pre vit, pre vit, pre vit incessantly, as it sits over the water, and then at last, rising on the last syllable, says pre-VEE, as if insisting on that with peculiar emphasis.*

**Carrie, March 16, 2024:**

To me, the call sounds more like an emphatic “*WHEE-zee! WHEE-zee!*”! The phoebes are on their way up from the south, following waterways, perching and bobbing their tails, flying out to snatch insects above the water. One day between today and the end of March (I’ve never had to wait until April 1), one will arrive at a bridge over the Hop River, and I’ll hear its

voice. From that point on, spring will progress at an ever-increasing pace. We'll be racing to keep up with it.



**Very first bluets (*Houstonia caerulea*), March 3, 2024, along Riverside Drive**