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By Ted Williams

Wild Turkeys

Great Egrets

Harbor Seals

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Turkey Talk

The only thing a tom turkey displaying on a spring strutting ground can possibly be mistaken for, say veteran wild turkey hunters, is a politician. The fleshy parts of his face turn bright red; he puffs himself up, spreads his tail, struts back and forth, and spews rhetoric best translated as gobble, gobble, gobble, gobble. There are only two species of turkey: *Meleagris gallopavo* of North America (represented in the wild by five subspecies and domesticated by Indians about 2,000 years ago) and the smaller, more colorful *Meleagris ocellata* of southern Mexico and Central America. Other species, now extinct, lived on both New World continents, but apparently turkeys have never occurred naturally anywhere else. Nearly wiped out by market hunters, wild turkeys have been restored by intelligent hunting regulations and state trap-and-transfer programs funded by sportsmen. Since 1930 they've increased in North America from something like 20,000 to about five million.

Plumed Hunters

The best tonic for the benighted souls who imagine that the fight to save wildlife is hopeless is to watch great egrets--the backs of both sexes resplendent with long breeding plumes--stalk across newly thawed marsh and tidal flat. Unlike some other members of the heron family, they hunt only by day. Suddenly, one will freeze--maybe for 10 minutes--then harpoon a fiddler crab or killifish. Among our herons only the great blue--also white on occasion but lacking the great egret's black legs--is larger. Today, from Oregon to Massachusetts and south, the great egret is the most abundant white heron near water, but a century ago we almost lost it. Perhaps we would have if it hadn't been for the Audubon Society, which offered public lectures on such topics as "Woman as a Bird Enemy," and activists like Celia Thaxter, a noted poet of the day, who published vitriolic attacks on women adorned with egret plumes. "It was merely a waste of breath," she wrote after she'd lectured one slave of fashion barely visible under an enormous hat, "and she went her way, a charnel house of beaks and claws and bones and feathers and glass eyes upon her fatuous head."

Seal of Good Parenting

In the Northern Hemisphere's temperate and Arctic seas, early spring is pupping time for harbor seals--probably the most wide-ranging and abundant of all pinnipeds. The cat-size pup, delivered on land or in water, can swim almost immediately. Sometimes it rides on the spotted back of its big-eyed mother. When it wants attention it slaps the water with its front flippers and, in perfect English, cries maaaa. When the mother perceives danger she cradles the pup with her flipper or pushes it beneath the surface. There is virtually no chance that a lone pup on a beach has been abandoned, so don't

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attempt a rescue. Six weeks after birth, pups can be seen reclining against the waves, chewing small fish. Before long they will start to catch large ones, holding and rotating them as if they were corn on the cob.

The Flight of the Bumblebee

A bumblebee may not be the first insect you see this year, but it's likely to be the first you hear. "The sound of [the] buzz," offers poet Mary O'Neill, "is a rick-racky singsong / Muffled in fuzz." It starts suddenly on some hushed day in late winter over snow-bent grass or along the sun-washed side of your house where the wet earth splits over swelling bulbs. Never will you see bumblebees bigger than the ones you see now, for they are queens laden with fertilized eggs--the sole survivors from last autumn. A queen's flight is not wild and erratic, as Rimsky-Korsakov's operatic score would imply, but slow, low, and purposeful. She is searching for a nest site--an abandoned chipmunk burrow, perhaps--which she'll stuff and camouflage with grass, moss, and leaves. Next she'll make a wax pot the size of a thimble and fill it with honey; finally, she'll knead pollen and nectar into a loaf of "bee bread." The honey will sustain her while she's brooding, and the larvae will eat the bread. Six of North America's 51 bumblebee species are parasitic--cowbird analogues whose queens lay eggs in nests of other species and let the workers rear their young. The bumblebee's dense hair allows it to live in colder climates than most other flying insects. Colonies have been found 545 miles from the North Pole. We are particularly fond of our bumblebees, for reasons both obvious and elusive: They are harbingers of fine weather, they resemble winged teddy bears, and they are so good-natured that getting one to sting you is a major undertaking. But most important, perhaps, they are ours; unlike honeybees, they are native to the continent.

River Dance

How lifeless seem the rivers and rills that meet the cold Atlantic in mudtime. All that moves within them are caddis fly larvae shuffling over stone and log or perhaps the brown carcasses of last year's water milfoil and coontail waving languidly in the swollen current. Then, in a storm of protein from the sea, come the river herring. In pools below the outfalls of ancient mill dams and rickety fishways, they spiral like galaxies, swollen with eggs and milt, spooking themselves, dashing downcurrent, then returning and holding again until the town herring warden releases water for their upstream journey. River herring is the collective name for two nearly identical species occurring along most of the East Coast: the alewife and the slightly sleeker, smaller-eyed blueback herring, which starts its spawning run a few weeks later. Don't walk by a coastal stream without looking. Mostly they pass unseen, save by herons hunched over the pools like old men in ratty down jackets standing at a truckstop counter.

Golden Harbinger

If you thought the first bright wildflower of spring was a small dandelion, look closer. It's probably coltsfoot--a diminutive, look-alike relative from Eurasia and Africa that's now naturalized in most of America. Officially, it's a weed, but in the bleakness of March one has difficulty generating much antipathy toward the gaudy, golden blooms bravely pushing through mud and snow. Oddly, the flowers die before the horse-hoof-shaped leaves appear, a trait that convinced early botanists that the plant was leafless. Both flower and leaves have been used as cough medicine for at least 2,000 years. The silk crowning the seedheads is favored as nesting material by chickadees and goldfinches.