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Earth Almanac: May/June 2001

By Ted Williams

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Jill-in-the-Pulpit

If you've left any bootprints in low, wet places along the eastern coastal plain and piedmont, you've probably encountered the jack-in-the-pulpit. This cousin of the skunk cabbage is named for the hood that serves as an umbrella, protecting flowers and pollen and resembling the baffle of an old-fashioned pulpit. "Jack" is the clublike, flower-bearing spadix within. What you might not have realized is that there are female jack-in-the-pulpits, known as jills, and that a usually one-leafed jack will change into a usually two-leafed jill if growing conditions are good. Jills change back into jacks when growing conditions worsen. To distinguish the sex, gently lift the hood. If the flowers deep inside look like threads, you've got a jack. If they resemble tiny green berries, you've got a jill. These ubiquitous spring wildflowers transplant well, but the stress tends to turn jills into jacks. Better to wait till late summer and collect the red berries for planting.

Whistler's Father

If you live in the eastern two-thirds of the nation and south of the northern tier, don't miss the predawn concert of the male bobwhite quail. It starts in brushy grasslands or in the understory of open woods with the first red wash on the eastern sky--a whistling so loud and clear that obedient dogs have responded to it: *White. Bob White*. Unlike most gallinaceous birds, the male helps to build the nest, incubate the eggs, and rear the young. The great ornithologist Arthur Cleveland Bent recalled how a bobwhite performed a variant rendition of the "broken-wing act" by flying at him and, with a shrill whistle, collapsing at his feet as if it were dead: "I stooped and put my hand upon his extended wings and could easily have caught him. The young birds, at the cry of the parent, flew in all directions; and their devoted father soon followed them, and began calling them in a low cluck, like the cry of a brown thrasher." For protection, quail will arrange themselves in a circle, facing outward like musk oxen, but instead of attacking approaching predators, they'll flush together in an explosion of wings.

Leopard in the Grass

Already they're stalking prey through the high grass of southern meadows. But in the North you can still hear them roaring (or, perhaps more descriptively, "snoring") from the surface--and even below the surface--of ponds and dawdling streams. These leopards are semi-terrestrial frogs that inhabit most of temperate North America, save the West Coast. Taxonomists argue about how many subspecies of leopard frogs there are but generally agree on four species: northern, southern, plains,

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and Rio Grande. Watch for leopards as they hunt crickets, grasshoppers, spiders, and such. You can even feed them by hitching a thread to a long stick, tying on a large insect or a piece of fish or meat, and making it hop along the ground. They'll snap it up, then stuff it into their mouths with their "hands." Catching leopard frogs with your hands is a challenge because of their rapid, zigzag leaps, but if you succeed, you'll discover that they "chuckle" only when annoyed. Once the most widely distributed frogs in North America, leopards are experiencing a drastic decline. Among the many causes is their widespread collection by supply houses for classroom study.

Fiddler on the Marsh

When mud and sand suck warmth from the high sun, the fiddle section rises and pirouettes across the fragrant marsh, silently accompanying the symphony of shorebirds, breaking waves, and sea wind through cordgrass. From southern California to Baja, along our Gulf Coast, around Florida, and north to New England, you'll encounter sundry species of fiddler crab, so named for the male's enlarged claw. On some marshes there may be 150,000 fiddlers to the acre. When a courting male spies a female, he'll rear up and wave his fiddle higher and higher until he almost tips over. If she shows interest, he'll rush back and forth between her and the entrance to his burrow. Then he'll duck inside and drum on the walls with his big claw. When the female enters he'll guide her down to the mating chamber, then slip back and shut the entrance with a mud plug. The female incubates her eggs for a fortnight, then returns to the surface to send her brood off on the big flood tide of the new or full moon. The young will mature in the estuary for four weeks, then return as subadults under the next new or full moon.

Damsels and Dragons



Two hundred and fifty million years ago, even before the rise of dinosaurs, they patrolled steaming Carboniferous swamps on veined, translucent wings. As other life-forms vanished from our planet, these ancient predators prospered; today there are few places on earth where you can't find at least one of some of the 5,000 species of Odonata--damselflies and their close relatives, dragonflies. Dragonflies have enormous eyes, while the eyes of damselflies are smaller and set more widely apart. Unlike dragonflies, which keep their wings open while resting, damselflies hold their wings together over their backs. With the first warm days of spring, Odonata nymphs crawl out of still and flowing water, climb whatever's handy, and emerge as adults through splits in their skin. Look for them before they take flight as they rest beside their cast-off exoskeletons, pumping hardening fluid from their bloated bodies into veins in their still-soft wings. Soon they'll be hawking insects and, according to some sources, showing good boys where the pickerel are and sewing the lips of bad boys shut.

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Underdogs

Remove the black-tailed prairie dog from its niche in our western plains and--as Americans have discovered over the past century--the whole biota collapses like the sides of a stone arch. This stocky ground squirrel, whose name derives from its bark, is called a keystone species because it provides food and/or habitat for at least 59 vertebrate species--29 birds, 21 mammals, 5 reptiles, and 4 amphibians. The elaborate subterranean design of a prairie-dog town includes bedrooms, latrines, birthing and nursing chambers, pantries, even cemeteries. In May look for youngsters as they stumble up into the sunlight for the first time in their six-week lives. Soon they'll be roughhousing, grooming each other, and greeting neighbors with chirps, hugs, and open-mouthed "kisses." Because prairie dogs eat forbs and grasses, they have been widely poisoned and shot in the mistaken belief that they compete with livestock. Studies, however, show that in aerating and turning over the soil they produce high-quality forage.