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Earth Almanac: March/April 2002

By Ted Williams

Wolf Spider

Hepatica

Gila Monster

Muskrat

Striped Bass

Atlantic Puffin

Backyard Wolves

When snowpacks shrink and the wet earth stirs with insect life, hungry wolf spiders--common most everywhere on the planet, especially in the United States--emerge from their dens and burrows. These stout, hairy arachnids can reach two inches in length. All 3,000 known species lack the ability to spin webs; instead, they pursue their prey, sometimes running it down like wolves (though not in packs), sometimes ambushing it like cougars. Eight prominent eyes allow a wolf spider to take in the scene above and behind. A male courts a female by tapping the ground and waving his front legs and two armlike, sperm-transferring appendages, called pedipalps, at her. The female totes her eggs in a sac, and when the young emerge they may ride on her back.



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Spring Cure-all

These days the main and best use of hepatica is for brightening late-winter woodlands just about everywhere in America and, with them, the spirits of those afflicted with cabin fever. You have to admire any wildflower with the pluck to bloom under corn snow. But combine this with blossoms that vary between white, lavender, pink, and blue, all in pastels as delicate as the season is harsh, and you have what John Burroughs called "the gem of the woods." Hepatica is also used (with declining frequency) to treat sunburn, bleeding lungs, and, since its leaves are shaped like a liver, ailments of that organ. Seventeenth-century English herbalist Nicholas Culpeper recommended it for "bites of

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mad-dogs." American Indians used it to straighten crossed eyes and expel--albeit with the contents of their stomachs--dreams about snakes.

Slow-Motion Monster

Early spring is the best time to see one of the few monsters recognized by science--a resident not of lochs or seas but of the deserts of our Southwest. The Gila monster, our largest lizard, spends 98 percent of its time underground. But now, especially early in the day, it waddles about looking for eggs, young birds, and young mammals. At a maximum size of 5 pounds and 24 inches, it's a thoroughly unimpressive "monster," but it is one of only two descendants of the venomous lizards that roamed the earth 40 million years ago. Its poison, about as potent as that of a rattlesnake, is chewed into the victim; but there isn't much, and it is almost never fatal to people. Unlike rattlesnakes, Gila monsters use their venom strictly for defense. Moreover, they're so sluggish they almost require human help in the human-biting process. If you get bitten, it serves you right--at least according to one Dr. Ward, who, in the Arizona Graphic of September 23, 1899, vented his spleen as follows: "I have never been called to attend a case of Gila monster bite, and I don't want to be. I think a man who is fool enough to get bitten by a Gila monster ought to die."

Muskrat Love

In every contiguous state and north to Arctic tundra, muskrats are beginning or about to begin their long, productive breeding season. Four times the size of Norway rats but stockier and with rounder ears and blunter faces, they are really aquatic voles. And like other voles, they are primarily herbivores, consuming a wide variety of marsh plants with occasional side dishes of mussels, crayfish, frogs, and turtles. On still nights, listen for the squeaky vocalization of the courting female, approximated with surprising accuracy in the pop song "Muskrat Love." Where there is still ice you'll see muskrats popping up through the dome-shaped "push-ups" they have maintained all winter. In warmer latitudes look for them at the apex of the V's they carve on moonlit or starlit water, as they paddle with outward-turned feet, steering with vertically flattened tails, heads, and rumps above the surface, pushing silver wedges of "bow wake."

Return of the Striper

Fresh from the icy Atlantic, silver fish clad in the black pinstripes of football referees (but blessed with better eyesight) are pouring into the Hudson, the Delaware, and the rivers of Chesapeake Bay to spawn in fresh water. The striped bass, a.k.a. "striper," is capable of attaining weights of more than 100 pounds. Ten to 50 males orbit the larger female, churning the surface and racing over her on their sides, as if wounded. A 4-pound female can produce 426,000 eggs; a 55-pounder, 4.2 million. Stripers, which range naturally from New Brunswick to Florida and west to Louisiana, have been introduced on the Pacific Coast and in freshwater rivers and impoundments around the nation. Recent fluctuations in the native Atlantic population illustrate what waggish conservationists have called "the First Maxim of Fisheries Management"--that is, we don't start managing a stock until we wipe it out. In the late 1970s Atlantic stripers crashed, due largely to overfishing, but in 1984 Congress relieved the torpid states of management authority and awarded it to the Feds. Today, after 18 years of strict bag limits, the stock has rebounded.

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Beaks by Barnum & Bailey

When kelp-maned granite sheds its frozen crust, Atlantic puffins pause from their ocean wanderings. From Labrador to Maine and from Greenland and northern Russia to the Brittany coast, these cousins of the extinct great auk march stiffly onto rocky islands, the massive parrotlike beaks of both sexes aglow with impossible shades and sequences of blue, orange, and yellow. In 1925 ornithologist Edwin Howe Forbush described the puffin as "a solemnly comical Mr. Punch among birds" that speaks in "deep, sepulchral tones full of the deepest feeling and capable of harsh croakings." Puffins emerge from the sea with fish draped neatly from their beaks like socks from a clothesline. It seems as if someone with fingers had to have helped with the arrangement, but the bird's raspy tongue holds each fish against spines on its palate so it can open its beak and grab another. In flight, puffins resemble badly thrown footballs; when they hit the water they keep "flying," propelled by short, powerful wings to depths of at least 80 feet.