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By Ted Williams

Painted Ladies

Gaudy as confetti, painted lady butterflies waft north or south, depending on hemisphere, following the wave of new bloom. After the drabness of winter and mud time, these vast migrations would be tonic enough, but for those dispirited by the plights of specialized species, they provide a different, much-needed perspective. How refreshing to contemplate a lovely creature thriving all over the world--not because it was superimposed on native ecosystems or because humans have destroyed its competitors, but because it is adapted to virtually every moderately open tropical, temperate, and subarctic landscape on every continent save Australia and Antarctica. So widespread is this, perhaps earth's least endangered butterfly, that an alternate name for it is the cosmopolitan. Unlike the migration of monarchs, the migration of painted ladies is mostly one way--poleward from sunny wintering grounds where, also unlike monarchs, they hibernate. When you see a painted lady, or lots of them, don't just admire; think about the species and its statement of hope.

Loon Music

Fresh from their ocean wintering habitat along the Pacific, Gulf, and Atlantic coasts, from the Aleutians to Newfoundland, common loons are chasing spring toward the treeline, ditching into lakes like stricken bombers, kicking up spray and skidding sideways. Sometimes they arrive minutes after ice-out, a feat they accomplish with constant reconnaissance flights. Watch these goose-size birds as they thrash the water in their defensive "penguin dance" or as they hunt for fish, ruby eyes submerged,

black-and-white-checkered bodies floating high or low, depending on how much air they've squeezed from their feathers. Perhaps you will see one flash under your canoe, propelling itself with enormous webbed feet. Then, when the spires of the boreal forest blot the sun, listen to their music. It will start at one end of the lake and rush to the other--a wild, discordant yodeling like the thunder of expanding ice, a tremolo of demented laughter, somewhere a single, gentle hoot, or perhaps a wail like the distant whistle of a southbound freight. The yodel is the territorial vocalization of the male, actually the song. The wail and hoot are contact calls to family members; the tremolo, uttered in flight as well as on the water, connotes alarm. For those seeking respite from things human, few prescriptions are more curative than loon music. It is best taken when lying on one's back under bright stars and beside campfire smoke that rises straight, with the music itself, into the infinite northern night.

Sweet, Sticky Tree

Now coming into bloom in the eastern third of our nation is our tallest hardwood--the tulip tree, named for its spectacular orange-tinged, yellow-green flowers. Although it's also called yellow poplar, it's really a member of the magnolia family. There are but two species--one in the new world, one in the old. Because tulip trees can attain diameters of 12 feet and heights of 200 feet, they were used by Indians and early settlers to make dugout canoes. In 1799 Daniel Boone packed his belongings and family into a 60-foot tulip-tree canoe and struck off down the Ohio River for Spanish Missouri. Few, if any, North American plants generate more nectar per bloom than tulip trees. Bees working a grove have produced as much as 100 pounds of harvestable honey per hive. Stand under the flowers and you can feel the steady rain of sticky nectar. Park under them and you'll need a car wash.

Mini Pike

Take a closer look at those fish you thought were baby pickerel, pike, or muskellunge as they scoot or thrash--or hang, as if from mobiles--in sluggish streams, swamps, pond margins, and even floodwater. All pike spawn in early spring, but what are these hot-dog-size fish doing tearing up the shallows in large groups, broadcasting eggs and milt on thick vegetation? They're adults, too--"little pickerel," as the two subspecies are collectively called. So closely are they related that they'll interbreed where ranges overlap. The grass pickerel, of the Mississippi and Gulf Coast drainages, lacks the crimson fins of the redfin pickerel, which is confined to waters collected by the Atlantic. Little pickerel have dark, tear-shaped markings under their eyes and blunter snouts than their larger cousins. In some areas they are being depressed by non-native pike and bass unleashed on their habitat by an angling culture for which size and quality are synonyms.

Water Moths

Part of the twilight magic of streams and ponds are caddis flies, mothlike insects that emerge from daylight retreats to hover and dip or skate over the surface, sometimes vanishing into silver craters made by rising trout. Throughout North America, 1,400 known species representing 26 families come in a variety of dimensions and colors--from the size of gnats to the size of dragonflies, and in most every shade of brown, yellow, and green. Spring is the best time for watching both adults and larvae. Get to the water when there's still plenty of light, then study the bottom. Eventually, you'll see little "sticks" and "pebbles" moving over logs and stones. Pick them up and you'll find they are aquatic "caterpillars" that have encased themselves in sand or bits of wood, shell, or other detritus. They feed

on algae or carrion. A few forms don't build protective cases but hunt prey or catch it in tunnels or webs they weave with silk.

Barren-Land Bounder

Under the more arid regions of our Southwest, in dens lined with plant material, kangaroo rats are giving birth, usually to two to four young. The animals you see now, almost always at night, are likely to be males. There are 22 species, many of them threatened or endangered because so much of their habitat has been developed or tilled. Like their namesakes, kangaroo rats propel themselves with well-developed hind legs, balancing with long tails. In some species the tails are longer than the bodies, and by swinging them the animals can change directions in midleap. As they exhale, kangaroo rats are able to recover water vapor through their nasal passages, and they can metabolize the water they need from seeds. So powerful are their kidneys that they require only a quarter of the water used by humans to excrete the same amount of urea.