# Earth Almanac: January/March 2004

By Ted Williams



## Gaudy Undertakers

In spring our largest carrion-eating insect, the endangered American burying beetle, emerges from the earth, where it winters as a pupa, and scans the countryside with antennae that can detect decaying flesh a mile away. Lying on its back and using its legs like a conveyer belt, the beetle can move a creature 200 times its weight. A mated pair will bury a carcass, clip off its fur or feathers, and inject it with preservatives. Then the female excavates a nearby nursery, in which she lays 10 to 30 eggs. Both adults attend the larvae, which rear up and beg for food, stroking their parents' jaws like wolf pups and thereby inducing them to regurgitate. Burying beetles used to occur in at least 35 states but now are restricted to parts of Arkansas, Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts. Their decline may be linked to the extinction of prime food sources—the heath hen along the Atlantic coastal plain and, elsewhere, the passenger pigeon, thought to have been more numerous than all other North American birds combined. Currently the beetle's numbers are being further depressed by a proliferation of competing scavengers, such as skunks, raccoons, and opossums.

## Mini Monsters

From Arkansas to the Pacific and from British Columbia to Guatemala, horned lizards—magnified monsters of choice in 1950s horror flicks—are emerging from hibernation. Most taxonomists recognize 14 North American species inhabiting dry areas, from oak-pine forests to thorn-scrub deserts. All horned lizards (or "horny toads," as they are also called) have wide, flat, spine-fringed bodies and tails, and heads crowned with sharp, demonlike horns; few adults are more than seven inches long. Especially at this time of year these reptiles can be seen basking, their backs tracking the sun. At night they stay warm by digging into the dirt, first cutting a trench with their snouts, then enlarging it with their sides. When set upon by predators, they inflate their bodies like blowfish and, if pressed, can squirt streams of blood from the corners of their eyes for distances of several feet. For these "tears of blood," Mexicans call horned lizards torito de la Virgen, or the Virgin's little bull. Apparently the blood causes discomfort in attackers. A cat, thus anointed, was seen to froth at the mouth and roll.

## House Dads

In clear, cool, rocky lakes and streams across the United States, smallmouth bass—actually a species of sunfish—are easing into shallows. The males, smaller than the females, come first, cutting nests in gravel with their broad tails, then herding in their mates—often more than one. The male guards the eggs, fanning them with his tail, then broods the young. When males are on their nests they're extremely aggressive and will hit virtually any bait or lure, even if they have been caught and released the same day. A smallmouth's mouth is small only in comparison with that of its bigger and more ubiquitous cousin, the largemouth bass of warmer water. With its oversize fins, an adaptation to moving water, the smallmouth might better be called "largefin bass." Before 1869 smallmouths were largely restricted to the Lake Ontario and Ohio River drainage systems. But, toted in water tenders and tanks of the early railroads, they fanned out across the continent with their human admirers. Pound for pound, few, if any, freshwater fish are stronger. Today, thanks to the efforts of Ray Scott and the 600,000-member Bass Anglers Sportsman Society he founded, most serious bass fishermen no longer kill their catch.

## Desert Jesters

Monkeylike, nosy, noisy, gregarious, playful, busy, inquisitive, intelligent, comical. All these adjectives describe the white-nosed coatimundi, the raccoon's skinny, diurnal cousin, which before 1900 was rare or non-existent in the United States. Probably because of a warming trend, the species has been expanding its range into riparian areas and brush woodlands in the southern parts of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. The coatimundi seems to proclaim its attitude by carrying its long, ringed tail straight up and curled at the tip. Now, in Mexico and our Southwest, coatis are mating and—though it hardly seems possible—even more active than usual. Females, which travel in troupes of 5 to 20, admit one dominant male for breeding. At 15 pounds, he is nearly twice their size, but he is submissive. Still, when confronted by a rival male, he'll rear up, puff up, raise his snout, and display his impressive canines in a protracted grimace that can induce laughter in even the most clinical biologists. After the male impregnates the females, they throw him out of the troupe. Coatis spend hours grooming one another, removing burrs and ticks with their teeth. Like raccoons, they are omnivores, eating anything they stumble on, from fruit to small mammals to invertebrates to reptiles to birds and birds' eggs. They communicate by barking, chattering, hissing, spitting, growling, snuffling, scampering, and tail waving.

## Sap Savorers

East of the Rockies, yellow-bellied sapsuckers are moving north as sap rises in some 250 species of native trees favored by these furtive, medium-size woodpeckers. Listen for the drumming courtship duets of both sexes and watch tree trunks for horizontal lines of squarish holes, all pointed slightly downward to collect sap. After a sapsucker has excavated a tree, it will leave to work on another, then return to the first one and lick the sap with its brushlike tongue, tilting its head back as if swigging beer. Describing one feeding bird, John Burroughs, the 19th- and early 20th-century naturalist, wrote: "Then, when the day was warm, and the sap ran freely, he would have a regular sugar-maple debauch, sitting there by his wells hour after hour, and as fast as they became filled, sipping out the sap." Yellow-bellied sapsuckers guard their holes, squealing angrily at other birds and chasing them away. You can occasionally attract them with suet, peanut butter, or even hummingbird feeders, and they will sometimes nest in bluebird boxes.

## Breath Unfresheners

As mountain folk have long known, wild leeks are good for warding off rheum, ague, chilblains, collywobbles, and, especially, neighbors—unless, as so frequently happens, all the neighbors are eating them at once. Breath fresheners they're not, but wild leeks—called "ramps" or "rampscallions" in the southern Appalachians, where whole towns turn out for ramp-gathering/eating festivals—are generally said to be the most delectable of all onions and garlics, wild or domestic. What's more, they're rich in vitamin C and have the same capacity for reducing cholesterol as garlic. Striking green against the drab forest duff of early spring, these lovely, orchidlike members of the lily family abound in the deciduous woods of eastern North America. Look for the flat, rubbery leaves in moist, shady areas. Any doubt about what you've found will be thoroughly erased by crushing a leaf and inhaling the strong onion odor. Leeks' leaves and, later, their bulbs are superb in scrambled eggs, mashed potatoes, soups, and casseroles, or as onion substitutes in any recipe.