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Woodland Parasols

First you'll see the two-leafed parasols strewn in swaths of green across the rich, moist woodlands of the eastern United States and Canada. Hidden within each is the waxy white blossom of one of our earliest wildflowers—the mayapple, also known as the umbrella plant, mandrake, devil's apple, duck's foot, and ground lemon. Because it spreads by underground rhizomes, this member of the barberry family can colonize vast areas. Weeks after pollination—often in May—the blossom will form a yellow-green fruit the size of a bantam egg, much prized by country folk for making jellies and jams. Unripe fruit, leaves, stems, and roots, however, are toxic, and it is this toxicity that makes the mayapple so useful as medicine. Wild plants found in Canada today are thought to be descendants of mayapples cultivated by ancient Indians, who used extracts to treat worms, snakebite, and urinary, liver, bowel, and skin disorders, and as an insecticide, boiling the whole plant and applying the broth to seedlings. Because the mayapple contains substances that impede cell division, it is administered internally to treat malignancies and externally to shrink warts. Be sure to apply it only to your warts or it can damage surrounding tissue, warn herbal-medicine websites.

Singing Salamanders

Lesser sirens are named for the mermaids of Greek mythology who lured mariners onto rocks with their winsome singing. But hard pressed would be the sailor who mistook one of these large, snakelike aquatic salamanders for a mermaid or was attracted by its "song"—contented clicks or alarmed yelps. Vestigial forelimbs and missing hind legs make sirens unique among salamanders. Now, from Virginia to Florida and west to Texas and up the Mississippi Valley to Michigan, lesser sirens are laying their eggs. They live in muddy and densely vegetated water, so their breeding behavior has not been observed, but fertilization is apparently external, because females lack the cloacal sperm-storage areas of most other salamanders. Sirens are nocturnal, so you might see them if you check sloughs and backwaters with a flashlight well after sunset. You may even make scientific history by witnessing mating.

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Sun Sparks

Now with the greening of clover and alfalfa come flurries of clouded sulphurs, swirling like sparks toward the sun that pulled them from their pupae. Few, if any, butterflies are more ubiquitous; you'll find them in Alaska, Canada, and all the contiguous states. Look for these medium-size yellow butterflies as they sail over fields and meadows or spiral in pairs to heights of 60 feet or more. The spiral flights begin with a male and female flying low over the ground. But this is not mating behavior; it is mating-*avoidance* behavior, for the female has already been fertilized by another male and is anxious to get on with the business of egg laying. She is first to rise, and at the apex of the flight, the male gives up and drops to the ground like a dead leaf.

Sweet Music

How fitting that the caroling of the hermit thrush, widely held to be the sweetest of all birdsong, presages the chorus that builds with the lengthening days. A full hour before sunrise, again at dusk, and on through the waning twilight, it rises like the piping of Pan from mixed and coniferous woodlands across most of temperate North America: oh holy, holy, holy; ah-purity, purity, purity; eeh-sweetly, sweetly, sweetly. Nineteenth- and early 20th-century ornithologist F. Schuyler Mathews called this "the grand climax of all bird music" and submitted that "the passionate and plaintive notes of the nightingale apparently have no place in the hermit's song; our gifted thrush sings more of the glory of life and less of its tragedy." Unlike our other thrushes, the hermit has a reddish tail, which it flicks like a phoebe. Moreover, it is our only brown thrush that winters in the contiguous states, sometimes as far north as southern New England. As its name implies, it is a bird of the forest interior, but unlike other brown thrushes, it does well along the edges of clearings, roads, and other disturbances. In the past 35 years its numbers have increased in the Northeast.

Raining Mackerel

It is a cloudless, windless day in early spring, so how can rainsqualls be sweeping across the surface of the sea? From Newfoundland to North Carolina, what looks like rain on water is actually vast shoals of Atlantic mackerel moving in on their spawning run from offshore depths and glutting themselves on small fish, squid, zooplankton, fish eggs, and crustaceans. Approach too quickly in your boat and they will vanish, diving rapidly because they are unencumbered with air bladders. Atlantic mackerel, luminous green with dark bands on their backs and rarely more than two feet in length, are diminutive members of the family Scombridae, which includes the tunas, bonitos, and albacores. Like most scombrids they are speedsters, a useful adaptation in that they're relished by some of the swiftest predators on earth, including porpoises, billfish, and the aptly named mackerel sharks—most notably the mako and porbeagle. If you can't locate mackerel on the surface, anchor and chum. Cat food or sardines will work, but by far the most effective chum is Atlantic mackerel itself—finely diced or run through a meat grinder. In a few minutes the fish will be zipping around and under your boat. Atlantic mackerel will pounce on any small, bright fishing lure, and they are elegant table fare, provided you neutralize the taste of their rich omega oil by grilling or broiling them with tomatoes or other fruits.

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Spring Fishing

When northern lakes and estuaries are still rimmed with ice, the osprey—a.k.a. the fish hawk—welcomes spring with a shrill, ascending *kyew, kyew, kyew*. On every continent save Antarctica, you'll see these white-crowned, black-masked raptors hovering over water or perched on stick nests that can weigh 1,000 pounds. Note the slightly crooked wings that can span six feet, the long legs, and the aerial acrobatics of courting males. Ospreys will take the odd mink, muskrat, or snake, but their diet is almost exclusively fish. They're not closely related to other hawks, apparently having veered off on a separate path early in their evolution; some taxonomists even place them in a family by themselves. Spines on footpads and a front claw that swivels to the back assist in gripping their slippery prey. Oil in their feathers repels water. Ospreys hit the surface in an explosion of spray, closing their nostrils (unlike bald eagles, they can submerge completely); then they rise laboriously, shaking like a dog. If they've been successful, they'll immediately turn the fish so the head points forward. Sometimes an osprey will strike a fish that's too big for it and, unable to release its talons, will drown. Recently a Bahamian conch fisherman from South Andros Island found a dead osprey clutching a dead barracuda. He ate them both.