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Earth Almanac: March/April 2008

By Ted Williams

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Michael Durham/Minden Pictures

Cool Cat

In the southwest quarter of the country male ringtail cats are rubbing urine into the ground and onto raised objects. While such scent-post marking is standard behavior throughout the year, it now becomes a method of attracting prospective mates as well as deterring competing males. Ringtail cats are not felines but slender, diminutive cousins of the raccoon. Like raccoons they are largely nocturnal, and they're even more arboreal, leaping nimbly among branches, instantly reversing direction, even performing cartwheels. This agility is derived from sharp, semi-retractile claws, a long, heavy tail that aids in balance, and hind feet that rotate 180 degrees. Ringtails are meticulous groomers. After eating or sleeping they'll sit catlike on their haunches, cleaning their fur with tongue and forepaws. Capture a ringtail, and it will scream loudly and douse you with vile-smelling musk from its anal glands. Such rocky introductions notwithstanding, ringtails are easily tamed—a fact not lost on early miners and other settlers, who kept them to control mice.

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Richard Kolar/Animals Animals

Greek Bloodbath

Throughout most of the East and Midwest, except the extreme north, one of our earliest spring wildflowers is brightening the mudtime woods. It originated from the blood of Adonis, newly killed by Ares, god of war, and sprinkled over the earth by a grieving Aphrodite—at least according to Greek mythology. The rue anemone's alternate name, "wind flower," may derive from the fact that its spindly stalk sometimes makes it dance in the wind or from the ancient notion that the winds of March bring April flowers. Rue anemones are usually about nine inches high, and their spectacular white, pink, or, rarely, lavender flowers have 6 to 10 petal-like "sepals" arranged in clusters just above whorls of small leaves. The plant contains no nectar, relying instead on the rich colors of its blossoms to attract pollinating insects, mostly flies. Look for rue anemones in open forests and on hillsides. Now, in the yet-leafless woods, they are soaking up sunlight. Soon they'll enter dormancy, protected from the intense rays of late spring and summer by the green hardwood canopy.

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Philip Hamilton/New England Aquarium

Wrongs to Rights

Cruising underwater for a third of an hour, then punching through the surface to take four to six short breaths, female right whales and their young are migrating from calving grounds off Florida and Georgia to their summer range off New England and Canada's Maritimes. These are northern right whales, and while two other subspecies (the southern right and north Pacific right) are recognized, all are strikingly similar. Right whales, the first cetaceans to be commercially exploited, got their name because they were slow, easily pursued, and floated when dead—ergo, they were the “right” whale to kill. Their heads, which make up a quarter of their body length, are splotched with callosities—crusty skin growths housing whale lice that graze on dead tissue. Unlike most other whales, rights lack dorsal fins. It is not clear why, after 70 years of protection, the species still flirts with extinction while other whales, such as grays, humpbacks, and sperms, have rebounded. One possible explanation is that right whales are slow and ponderous and therefore especially vulnerable to ship strikes and entanglement in fishing gear.

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Joel Sartore

Dazzling Brilliance

In swamps, bottomland hardwood forests, and brushy stream banks and lakeshores from the Atlantic coast between Florida and New York and as far west as Texas and Kansas, prothonotary warblers are going about the business of breeding. Named for the gold and yellow robes worn by "prothonotaries" (Catholic clerks), they are among our most brilliantly colored wood warblers and one of only two warbler species that nest in cavities (the other being Lucy's warbler of our southwestern deserts). Male prothonotaries get touchy and territorial in this season, often attacking competitors so ferociously that both combatants fall onto the ground or into water. The male, similar in coloration but moderately brighter than the female, courts her intensely, puffing plumage, spreading wings and tail. Or he will fly close by, serenading her (and being serenaded in return) with soft, rapid tsip notes much different than the more typical loud, sharp tship call. If the female is responsive, she will alight, twitter, droop and quiver her wings, and raise her rump and tail. When the male finds a potential nest cavity, he shows it off to her by popping in and out.

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Joel Sartore

Smelly Bugs

Throughout most of the United States, box elder bugs, now emerging from hibernation, cause considerable consternation and almost no harm, not even to the box elders and maples on which they may shortly feed both as nymphs and adults. On the Pacific side of the Rockies, you'll encounter the western box elder bug; on the other side, the virtually indistinguishable eastern box elder bug. Both are about a half-inch long and congregate by the hundreds on windowsills, doorways, and rugs along the south-facing sides of fences, tree trunks, and buildings. They don't bite or sting, but if you step on them or pick them up, they'll emit a foul-smelling liquid. Vacuum cleaners are the most efficient means of removing box elder bugs from your house, but empty the bag outside or they'll crawl out the business end of the machine after you put it away. As you bid them adieu, admire their crimson eyes and striking red-orange stripes on the margins of their black wings and thoraxes.

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Joel Sartore

Bluster and Bull

In sand prairies, dry savannas, and semi-deserts throughout the middle third of our nation, bullsnares are emerging from the rock crevices, abandoned prairie dog tunnels, and old wells where they have slept away the winter, curled in the embraces of their kin as well as such species as rat snakes, milk snakes, timber rattlers, and racers. March is an excellent time to find these enormous, beautifully patterned constrictors as they bask in the spring sun, often perched atop a gopher mound. As the days lengthen, males search for females. An adult bullsnares is an impressive beast on any occasion, never more so than when it feels threatened. It will hiss loudly, puff up its body (which may be seven feet long), and vibrate its tail, creating a sound like an angry rattler, especially if there is dead vegetation underneath. A wild bullsnares may attempt to bite if you pick it up. But more often than not it will quickly quiet down.

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Tom Vezo/Minden Pictures

A Happy Wail

Where cliffs and bluffs overlook western steppes, deserts, and treeless mountainscapes, prairie falcons are courting. The male folds his wings and dives, uttering piercing cries. Presently he struts around a prospective nest site—usually a flat area or a hole on the side of a steep rock face—and the female carefully examines it. A courting pair will perch and fly together, sometimes exchanging prey in midair. Because mammals are an important part of their diet and they frequently inhabit arid country of scant value for agriculture, prairie falcons escaped the exposure to chlorinated hydrocarbon pesticides that caused virtual extinction of their cousin, the eastern peregrine falcon. The prairie falcon's aggressiveness and relative abundance makes it especially popular with falconers.

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Sally King/National Park Service

Dwarf Daises

From western North Dakota to Alberta and south to Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, Easter daisies are splashing some of the year's first color across dry prairies. Among the smallest relatives of the sunflower, they are no more than two inches high, and their white or pink, yellow-centered blooms are about as wide, giving the impression that there's no stem, or "scape"—hence the specific name *exscapa*, Latin for "without a scape." The Easter daisy's dwarf stature makes it especially popular with rock gardeners. It is easily cultivated, provided you protect it from excess moisture in winter.

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