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## Earth Almanac: May/June 2009

By Ted Williams

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Kim Taylor/NPL/Minden Pictures

### Udder Hokum

Farming is a test. If it's not the nightjars (a.k.a. "goatsuckers") swilling from the teats of your nannies, it's the milk snakes emptying the udders of your dairy cows. That either tale was ever commonly believed (as invariably reported in the literature) is debatable, but farmers loved their animal mythology, hence the names. The milk snake, abiding east of the Rockies, is our most widely distributed and, arguably, most beautiful snake. This secretive, cold-tolerant constrictor haunts barns because rodents are a major part of its diet. It protects itself from predators by mimicking the flashy color pattern of the venomous coral snake, but this same strategy often leads to its demise at the hands of humans who misidentify it. If you encounter a snake with red, black and yellow bands, remember this ditty: "Red on black, friend of Jack. Red on yellow, kill a fellow." Even if it's not a coral snake, there's an excellent reason not to handle it: You're apt to get hosed down with vile-smelling feces. Now is the best time to go looking for these gaudy reptiles because, as summer approaches, they become increasingly nocturnal. If you don't find one in the open, start turning over boards and logs.

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Woodfall Wild Images/Photoshot/NHPA

## The Catbird Feats

The gray catbird heralds high spring east of the Rockies. The males come first, in congregations aptly called “mewings”—from the catlike complaint that terminates their rambling, melodious, often nocturnal songs. Like their cousins the mockingbirds, they are accomplished mimics—or, as the PC bird police now insist, “vocal appropriators.” One catbird that resided near a cemetery where “Taps” was frequently played learned the notes of the first three phrases. Early 20th century ornithologist Chester Reed nailed the bird’s personality when he wrote that it seems “determined to find out what you are doing, why you are doing it, and what you are going to do next.” And ornithologist Edward Forbush, Reed’s contemporary, described it as “in turn a merry jester, a fine musician, a mocking sprite, and a screaming termagant.” No other species provides a better excuse for cooling it with the clippers and pruning shears, for preserved thickets provide nesting sites. Watch the wild courtship chases, and listen to the outpouring of song. Puffed up and tail lowered, the male bows until his bill touches the ground, lifts his tail, sashays, struts, and flashes his chestnut rump patch. Both sexes construct several “practice nests,” but the female usually builds the final one. If a cowbird lays eggs in it, she will almost always eject them. But if a cowbird discards her first egg, the catbird may misidentify and eject her own eggs.

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Chuck Musitano

## Barflies

As the ascending sun greens the continent, many species of butterfly—especially blues, swallowtails, sulphurs, and skippers—congregate around wet soil, sometimes by the hundreds, in “drinking clubs.” As with humans, participants are mostly younger males, and they’re taking on some of the same nutrients—sodium and amino acids of the sort found in beer and booze, for instance. The difference is that male butterflies lose sodium and amino acids when they pass their spermatophores on to females as nuptial gifts. If the ground is too dry, they may “spit” on it to dissolve the salts they seek. They’ll even perch on turtles and crocodilians to sip their tears. Sometimes the insects become so preoccupied with drinking they’ll climb onto your finger and imbibe the sweat. To make a butterfly bar in your yard, fill a bucket with sand, bury it to the rim, and dump in water, beer, and fruit juice. Spring azures, carousing in the earliest of all drinking clubs, inspired Robert Frost’s poem “Blue-Butterfly Day,” which ends with: “And now, from having ridden out desire/ They lie closed over in the wind and cling/ Where wheels have freshly sliced the April mire.”

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Merlin D. Tuttle/Bat Conservation International

## Bat Babies

No state in our union is free of bats—disheartening news, were any of the myriad wives’ tales about them true. Bats are not particularly prone to rabies. They’re unlikely to stink up your attic unless you block their exit holes before they leave for the winter. And it would take prodigious effort for a bat to become entangled in a woman’s hair—on the part of the woman, that is. Now female bats are bearing young. Of the 45 species in the United States, three you’re likely to see are little brown bats, big brown bats, and, in the East, tricolored bats (pictured here). When bats orbit at twilight, watch with binoculars and you may see a female carrying her blind, hairless pup, which she delivered only a day or two earlier, catching it in the skin that connects her back legs—the same membrane she uses to net insects. Toss a pebble skyward and watch bats veer toward it, as they pick it up with their “sonar.” The best way to attract them is to put up a bat house. For instructions, go to [Bat Conservation International](#) and search for “bat houses.”

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Daniel Mosquin

## Sweet Nothings

You can fool some of the bees all of the time, a fact on which the Calypso orchid—a.k.a., “fairy slipper”—depends. This diminutive wildflower—among the earliest bloomers in the northern coniferous forests of Eurasia, Canada, and the United States—has no nectar. But its purple-striped, yellow-fringed lower petal looks like something out of a candy store. There are always enough gullible bees to fall for the ruse. They enter hungry and emerge disappointed and covered with pollen, which, having learned nothing, they transfer to the next Calypso orchid. The plant is named for Homer’s sea nymph—famed for her beauty—who, lusting after Odysseus, detained him and his crew for seven years on the isle of Ogygia. Calypso orchids obtain nutrients from decomposing conifer needles via a partnership with fungi, so they’ll die if you try to transplant them.

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Robert Royse

## Piper in the Grass

Across the Midwest, buff-breasted sandpipers are migrating from the pampas of Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay to Siberian and North American tundra. "Grasspipers," as they are sometimes called, are technically shorebirds, but look for them now on dry, grassy inland areas such as golf courses, airports, sod farms, vegetated mudflats, and even expansive lawns. Soon males will be dancing over Arctic grass as they compete for females in congregations called leks, behavior not seen in other shorebirds. A male will wave a wing and, if a female approaches, embrace her with both wings, stand on his toes, inflate his chest, vibrate his wings, and rotate as if waltzing. A competing male may approach stealthily on his belly or upright and mimicking a female, then disrupt the dance. Or he may just sail in and scatter the females. As with other lekking species, the pair bond lasts only as long as copulation.