

Discoveries

News & views from Discovery Southeast

Spring 1995



Is it spring yet?

Kathy Hocker

Sometimes it seems that we humans are overly fond of categorization. Here in the temperate zone, we are given to pigeonholing time into something we call “seasons”. Spring, summer, winter and fall: we treat each as if it were a distinct segment of the year’s cycle. Sometimes we try to define the month or even day on which each season begins.

I write this article on the vernal equinox. On this day, points on the Earth’s equator are closest to the sun as the planet turns, and subsequently points on the globe are treated to equal amounts of daylight and dark. It is a significant day for us mapmaking and linedrawing folk, for whom the equator is important.



Vaccinium ovalifolium (early blueberry) flowers even before leaves finish unfolding.

But the truth is that the equator is just one of an infinite number of imaginary lines which are significant in an astronomical sense and not particularly relevant

when it comes to the day-to-day movements of life. Our fond delusion is that “spring,” too, is a distinct entity: a time of the year that has a beginning and an end and that can be predicted. Actually, nature is quite a bit messier than our timescale.

A case in point: try to find a sign that means winter in Juneau is over and spring is here. The snowmelt? Chickadee flocks breaking up? Pussy willows? The first robin (or varied thrush, or sparrow)? Devil’s club buds? The smell of cottonwood resin? A case could be made for any of these being a sure marker of spring’s arrival. But the snow hasn’t melted yet and there is already abundant fuzz on the willow tips. I saw a robin back in January and a fox sparrow in my-yard yesterday, but as of March 21, I have yet to wake to a varied thrush’s eerie song. The chickadees are still very sociable but on the warmer days lately I’ve been going delirious on the smell of cottonwood buds.

In Juneau, some of the first signs of what we call “spring” are often changes in plants. The earliest indicator of spring that I noticed this year was the fuzzy
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Executive Director named

The Board of the Discovery Foundation is pleased to announce the appointment of Susan Goes as Executive Director. She succeeds Cinda Stanek who resigned last summer.

A newcomer to Juneau, Susan moved here in September with her husband Jim, who joined the faculty of University of Alaska Southeast. Most recently, Susan was Director of Development for the Plymouth Music Series of Minnesota, an internationally acclaimed arts organization whose recordings have received a Gramophone award and a Grammy nomination.

Susan brings a unique blend of nonprofit management and business experience to Discovery Foundation. Among her past employers are the investment banking firm of Goldman Sachs and several professional arts organizations including The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra.

"The Discovery Foundation has accomplished much in its first five years," comments Goes. *"Like many young nonprofits, though, the organization's ambitions exceeded its bank balance. My key priorities will be to strengthen community awareness, eliminate the deficit and stabilize the financial situation, and build a broader base of support for core programs."*

Watershed education program launched

Susan Goes

If you find yourself near Duck Creek some day soon, keep an eye out for Discovery Foundation naturalist Richard Carstensen. He will be the one up to his hips in mud, surrounded by a team of eager 8th graders. The Discovery Foundation has been awarded a grant through the State of Alaska's Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) to lead a watershed education program for middle school students. (DEC is re-granting federal funds provided by the Environmental Protection Agency.) The \$20,000 grant provides for a naturalist to work with students and teachers to develop and implement educational projects relating to water quality and watershed issues.

Richard Carstensen's muddy mornings are an outgrowth of the Alaska Water Watch program, a statewide 'umbrella' organization that supports hands-on aquatic stewardship activities. Its current focus is providing support to water quality education in the schools and integrating school projects with other restoration efforts, hence this grant.

Duck Creek was chosen as the emphasis for the Discovery Foundation project as it is on the DEC's official "impaired" list and is the focus of a major community restoration effort. Although sometimes mistaken for a drainage ditch, Duck Creek is actually a small urban stream that flows approximately four miles through the center of the Mendenhall Valley. It is principally fed by groundwater and by stormwater runoff. Historically, the stream has supported a number of salmon species. Today, salmon populations are severely reduced, water quality is degraded, and stream corridor habitat conditions have been impacted.

In 1992, a number of state and federal agencies and community organizations banded together to launch the Duck Creek Restoration Project, whose goal is to return the entire stream corridor to a healthy, functioning ecosystem. Discovery Foundation activities in the schools will provide important data for this restoration effort as well as stimulate student 'ownership' of the stream.

Students will be gathering data about the physical condition of Duck Creek, performing water quality and macroinvertebrate sampling, monitoring animal sign, and developing maps of the stream. The Discovery

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Is it spring yet?

catkins on the willows, back in February. Other plants' buds are still swelling—alder, cottonwood, salmonberry, currant, and elderberry.

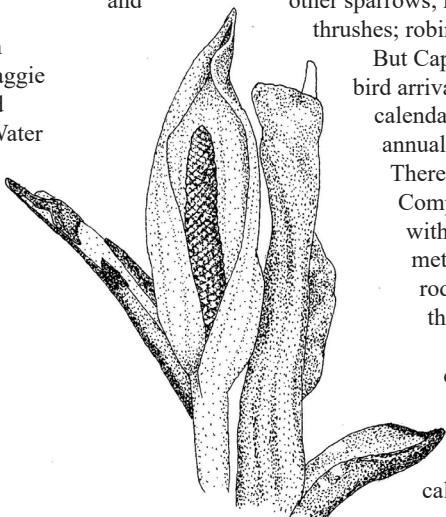
Each plant begins pumping nutrients and fluids into its buds in response to changes in light and temperature.

The appearance and disappearance of certain songbirds is another common milestone of spring. In February, March, and April, the migrants are on the move: redpolls, grosbeaks, and buntings move through Southeast Alaska toward their arctic nesting areas while the first of our nesting species begin to trickle in—goldencrowned, fox, song, and other sparrows; hermit, Swainson's and varied thrushes; robins; kinglets and other warblers.

But Capistrano notwithstanding, specific bird arrival times are not predictable by our calendars. Neither are plant buds or the annual, breakup of the Nenana River.

There are bigger powers than Hallmark Company at work. Maybe this is why, with all our physics and astronomy and meteorology, we still rely on a chunky rodent in Pennsylvania to predict the thaw.

Is it spring yet? I ask myself. The cottonwood and willow say yes, the chickadees say no. They each have their own spring, and it comes not at a predictable point on the human calendar but in their own good time.



Foundation work will be an in-depth extension of the existing 8th grade earth science curriculum.

In addition to working directly with students, naturalist Carstensen will be developing site-focused educational materials related to Duck Creek, including an overview for teachers, and fish and plant ID sheets for students. He will also serve as an educational liaison to the Duck Creek Advisory Group.

Initially, Richard Carstensen will be working with teacher Maggie Jacoby and her students at Floyd Dryden Middle School on this Water Watch project. Other classes may become involved following the pilot period. So the next time you're in the vicinity of Duck Creek, be on the lookout for budding young stream experts.

Juneau bird calendar

Richard Carstensen

Between 1980 and 1992 I lived at Eagle Beach, 30 miles north of Juneau. Each spring I recorded first arrival dates of migratory birds and first song of several overwintering species. Birds are listed here in order of first song or appearance, averaged over that 12-year span. Arrival dates varied between years according to weather, but the order of arrival was fairly consistent; once the Bonaparte gulls had shown up, I could expect savannah sparrows within a few days. The spread between earliest and latest first-arrival dates over the 13-year period was usually about 2 weeks. Some, like black-bellied plover

and Townsend's warbler, were more punctual, and always arrived within a few days of the average date. I used observations only from Eagle Beach for the following averages. Bob Armstrong, who lives on Thane Road, would often see birds a week or two sooner.

Beach Birds	Arrival	Forest/Thicket	Arrival
lapland longspur	April 1	varied thrush	March 17
northern harrier	April 11	blue grouse	March 24
yellowlegs*	April 15	American robin	March 24
American kestrel	April 18	dark-eyed junco	March 26
black-bellied plover	April 23	winter wren	March 30
"peeps"*	April 23	red-breasted sapsucker	April 5
Bonaparte gull	April 25	ruby-crowned kinglet	April 13
savannah sparrow	April 28	rufous hummingbird	April 22
dowitcher *	May 4	hermit thrush	April 29
white-fronted goose	May 7	Townsend's warbler	April 30
arctic tern	May 8	swallows*	May 2
spotted sandpiper	May 21	Pacific-slope flycatcher	May 18

* Denotes more than one species. First of any in the group to arrive was recorded. "Peeps" is a birders' lump term for several small sandpipers which can be hard to separate.