

Green Scene: Celebrating the Signs of Spring

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[photograph]

[caption: The bright red throat of this rufous hummingbird indicates it is a male. Now that spring is here, it's time to put out humming bird feeders.

Kiyoshi Takahashi photo]

[Title in Tri-City News: The birds, the bees, the buds: ah, those signs of spring

Sub-title: Sure, there are cherry blossoms, but skunk cabbage and the Indian plum also are harbingers of that most delightful season]

Is there anyone who doesn't enjoy spring? While each season has its own glories, no other season, not even the fullness of summer, come close to spring in my estimation with its delightful blossoms, the music of bird songs and the aroma of an awakening earth. In my own yard, I take delight in watching perennials push through the moist soil. As their leaves unfurl, I refresh my memory of their shape and growth habits. While some people may enjoy counting cherry blossoms, I take pleasure in observing the rites of spring in the natural world.

Among native plants, the first to bloom is skunk cabbage. Their large bright yellow flowers that emerge from wet forested areas in early March are surely one of our most spectacular floral displays. Their pungent odour is designed to attract pollinating beetles. Some call this plant swamp lantern – and it does seem to be a more appropriate name.

One of our native shrubs is a true harbinger of spring, the so-called Indian plum. It's always the first shrub to leaf out. In March, these shrubs transform drab deciduous forests into an understory of luminescent green. Their tiny white blossoms may escape most people's attentions but, in only a few weeks, these blossoms will become small fruits much relished by birds. To be absolutely correct, only some of the blossoms become fruits since these shrubs are either male or female. This time of year provides an opportunity to examine the flowers to determine the sex of each plant. I have been surprised to find the majority of these woodland shrubs appear to be male. I can only surmise that, perhaps, not having to put energy into producing a prolific crop of berries each year gives the male plants a competitive edge when it comes to producing roots and shoots.

After Indian plum reaches its peak bloom, the next native shrubs to flower are the attractive red flowering current and salmonberry. While red flowering current is more abundant in the drier and sunnier climate of Vancouver Island, it can be found here occasionally in sunny areas. Its flowers, more pink than red, are dense and showy compared to salmonberry. When David Douglas first explored the Pacific Northwest in the early 1800s, he became quite captivated by the red-flowering currant and sent samples back to Britain for propagation where they became a favourite plant of gardeners.

As spring advances, birds are undertaking seasonal migrations and pairing off for the approaching nesting season. Varied thrushes have mostly disappeared from backyards although another spell of cold weather

may bring them back, at least temporarily, from their higher-elevation nesting areas in local mountains. It's a sure sign of spring to see birds, such as robins and crows, flying with nesting material in their mouths.

Some of the first migratory bird species have already arrived from the south. A couple of weeks ago, we observed the first pair of band-tailed pigeons in our yard. While some of these large pigeons now overwinter in the Chines area where they rely on backyard feeders, the ones that come to our yard appear to be seasonal migrants that reliably put in their first appearance around the middle of March.

Blooming red flowering current and salmonberry are sure signs the humming birds will be back. We spotted the first one in our area on Easter Sunday. Male hummers are always the first to arrive; it may be a week or so before the females show up. Without a doubt – and even if you must walk under the protection of an umbrella - this season is one of the best to enjoy the sights and sounds in local parks and natural areas.