

This Week in the Woods March: Week Four

MARCH: WEEK FOUR



Thaw circle



Three-leaved goldthread



Red-winged blackbird



Forked fungus beetle larva



Eastern skunk cabbage



Field spider (Pardosa?)



Wild turkey mating season



Aquatic beetle (first sign of life in vernal pool!)



Sharp-lobed hepatica

This Week in the Woods, the great spring melt is progressing rapidly. Even on shady, north-facing slopes, you can now see **thaw circles** – rings of bare ground around the trunks of trees, caused by the bark radiating heat. Here's an interesting [article in *Ecology* magazine](#), noting that this phenomenon may be one reason that some early-blooming spring ephemeral wildflowers tend to thrive around tree trunks. As explained by the authors, plants that grow within these thaw circles

gain earlier access to the sun and therefore have more time to sprout, bloom, and seed before the late spring tree canopy shades the forest floor.

Three-leaved goldthread is emerging from the snow. As we noted in a [post last May](#), this small evergreen typically grows in damp soil, and its name refers to the orange color of its rhizomes. Here's a [profile from The Native Plant Trust](#).

Male **red-winged blackbirds** are back in swamps and marshes. They're competing with each other for territory, a contest that involves aggressive displays such as the one in the photo: tail down and spread, neck out, and red wing feathers standing at attention. (Thanks to Tig Tillinghast for the image.) Here's an [Outside Story essay by assistant editor Meghan McCarthy McPhaul](#), explaining that male birds show up in their summer breeding range about two weeks before females. The birds' romantic lives are complex; males attempt to establish harems, and females often mate with more than one male and raise a brood of half-sibling chicks. Despite the males' aggressive displays, they can be discreet when it suits their interests. As McPhaul notes, "red-winged blackbirds will cover their epaulets, leaving only the yellow border visible, when trespassing onto other territories – either foraging or seeking to acquire new territory. They'll also hide the bright red feathers when they perceive a threat, like a Cooper's hawk flying overhead." Check out this [profile of red-winged blackbirds from Audubon](#), including audio recordings of their calls.

If you pull a tinder polypore or other conk off a log, you may find a **forked fungus beetle larva** inside. These chubby white grubs grow all winter and spring inside the conk, and in summer transform into armored, strangely cute (?), little critters. Here's a [description of the insects](#) from the University of Florida, including a great macro shot of a male with its impressive curved horns. The post shares a number of interesting details about the species, such as their surprisingly long lifespans (up to 8 years) and the irritating chemical defense they deploy in response to mammal breath.

The speckled purple-to-red spathes of eastern **skunk cabbages** are emerging from the mud. They're such odd-looking plants, and inordinately stinky, but what's most surprising about them is that (along with only a few other plant species in the world) they're thermogenic, meaning that, like mammals, they can generate their own heat. In early spring, the difference between the ambient temperature and the temperature inside the plants' spathes (where the flowers bloom) can be several tens of degrees. As [Michael Caduto notes in this Outside Story essay](#), self-generated warmth has multiple benefits. It "promotes early pollination, protects flowers from freezing and frost, mobilizes the flower's fetid scent, and provides a haven for early-season insects."

Out in the meadow, we found tiny **spiders** running on top of and in between the snow-flattened grasses. Based on their habitat and eye arrangement (including a giant pair of eyes), we suspect that these are young wolf spiders, and more specifically, thin-legged wolf spiders, genus *Pardosa*. Check out this [post from Mary Holland's wonderful blog](#), noting that many of the spider species that actively hunt prey instead of relying on webs "spend the winter as nymphs, or juveniles, becoming full grown in the spring or early summer."

Male **wild turkeys** (toms) have begun performing their spring courtship displays, although so far, hens don't seem impressed. As [Bob Michelson noted for this photo series](#) on the life of the eastern wild turkey, published in last autumn's issue of *Northern Woodlands* magazine, "the full strut display includes dropped wings with primary wing feathers touching the ground, tail held in a vertical position with tail feathers spread into a fan shape, and erect breast feathers." Here's a [profile of the species](#) from New Hampshire Fish & Game, which notes that mating typically occurs in April, and nesting in May.

We've been keeping watch on a vernal pool, and this week were happy to see this first sign of life: a tiny **aquatic beetle**, rapidly maneuvering around and under melting ice. Here's an [Outside Story essay by Kenrick Vezina](#), explaining how aquatic beetles can remain underwater for long periods by carrying their own oxygen bubbles with them. And here's a [link from the Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Program](#), which notes, "The predaceous diving beetles reign supreme in the vernal pool environment...there are 500 species described for North America alone."

Sharp-lobed hepatica is another hardy little wildflower that's emerging from the snow with some of last year's leaves intact and ready to harvest the early spring light. This is one of the earliest wildflowers (along with its cousin, blunt- or round-lobed hepatica) blooming on the forest floor, and arguably one of the most beautiful of the entire season. Here's a [link to The Native Plant Trust's profile of the plant](#), and here's a [post from this series](#), indicating that hepaticas will be in bloom in our area by the third week of April, if not sooner.

Our thanks to The Bailey Charitable Foundation and the Frank and Brinna Sands Foundation for helping to support this series.

**Northern
Woodlands**

PO Box 270, Lyme, New Hampshire 03768
mail@northernwoodlands.org / 603-795-0660
www.northernwoodlands.org