

Don't know if you folks have noticed, but it's gotten a lot warmer lately. The red-winged blackbirds arrived back in Kleinstuck this week. This unusually cold end of February has them a bit later than usual this year. I've stepped into Kleinstuck the past couple nights in hopes of hearing the first frog calls, but it's been quiet so far. The bowl shape of Kleinstuck keeps things a little extra cool down there and I think "our" frogs get frisky a few days later than more exposed wetlands. They might have started calling at Asylum Lake since the cool air over the wetlands isn't trapped in a bowl. The first kinds of frogs to listen for are chorus, spring peeper, and wood frogs. Now that our nights are staying above freezing, the ice is going to disappear quickly and the wetlands are going to be rated PG-13 with froggy-love in a hurry!

The "warm" rain (by August I doubt we will be calling 45 degrees warm) over the next couple days might inspire the nocturnal migration of salamanders to the Kleinstuck marsh. Erin and I have witnessed a big tiger salamander move through our yard a couple times in years past. Tiger salamanders (6"-8" with yellow mottled bars over dark background) belong to the group of "mole salamanders" that include spotted (4"-6" with yellow polka dots) and blue-spotted salamanders (2"-4" with blue speckles). These are thick-bodied salamanders that spend most of their time living in underground tunnels and occasionally show up in people's window wells and Michigan basements. So far I've only seen tigers in Kleinstuck; I'd be interested to know if we have any of the other kinds too. The salamanders typically move en masse to wetlands to mate on one of the first warm rainy nights of spring.

In addition to salamanders, the song-bird migration has gotten underway as well. Along with the red-wings arriving, common grackles, killdeer, and American robins are showing up. The killdeer don't use Kleinstuck much, but they will be all over the Maple Street School ball fields. Mornings are wonderfully noisy now with cardinals, chickadees, titmice, and house finches who stuck it out for the winter singing to set up their breeding territories. I was happy to see a pair of Carolina wrens poking around our yard looking for nesting sites as well. This morning as I let the dog out, I got to watch a brown creeper work the bark of a big black cherry tree. They are cute little mousy-looking birds with long thin hooked beaks that hop up the trunks of trees in a spiral direction from the bottom upwards, looking for bugs, until they decide to try another tree and down they fly to start at the base of the next trunk.

And I'll leave you with this last odd little nature event. Last night Theo was having trouble settling down for sleep so I stepped out into the front yard in hopes the cool air would snap him out of his crankiness. Happily it worked, and as we stood quietly on the side walk I heard a leaf rustling in the curb lawn. I looked down and watched an old matted leaf curl and stand straight up in the lawn a few feet in front of us. How odd. As I listened more carefully, I could hear other leaves moving. I went and got Erin and all three of us stood on the front walk staring at our lawn (I suspect the neighbors are kind of used to seeing me standing and staring at things in my yard – and theirs – by now). Sure enough, there went another leaf, curling and standing up. What was going on?

Nightcrawlers! We stepped forward and there shining in the light from the street lamp was a great big worm. A couple months ago I went to the Stewardship Network conference and sat in on a workshop on invasive worms. They described recognizing a woodland where nightcrawlers had invaded by all the upright leaves sticking down into pencil-sized holes. Each nightcrawler has its own hole that is their home, and now I know a bunch of them live in my lawn. These European immigrants come out at night to feed on dead leaves and grass and will pull their food down into their hole with them. Now that the ground has thawed the nightcrawlers are coming to the surface and soon "midden piles" of worm castings (poop) will form around each hole, confirming the resident is at home.

Now you can add worm poop as another sign of spring to look forward to! I suppose it doesn't have quite the same romance of the first robin of spring... but after a long winter I'll take what I can get!

Happy spring,

Nate

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