

Signs of Spring in Winneshiek County

3rd Week of March



Pussy willow catkins out.

Catkins are the willow's flower and start out fuzzy, like little cat paws. That "fur" helps protect the important flower parts from the cold. As the flower matures, it will turn spiky yellow.

Look for pussy willows in marshes or moist woods.



American goldfinch males molting.

Male goldfinch molt their feathers each spring, growing bright new yellow and black feathers to replace their olive winter feathers. During their molt, they can be patchy white, yellow, and beige.

Look for American goldfinch at birdfeeders or near prairies or fields.



Skunk cabbage blooming.

Skunk cabbages are the first wildflower to bloom in Winneshiek County, often popping up right through snow. The purple spathe protects the knobby yellow flower tucked inside. Skunk cabbages are indeed skunky; their funky odor helps attract pollinating flies and beetles.

Look for skunk cabbage in wet woodlands with swampy ground.



Eastern chipmunks active.

Chipmunks seem to disappear for the winter, but they don't hibernate. They do sleep a lot in their cozy dens, but wake up periodically throughout winter to feed on stored nuts and seeds.

Look for chipmunks in hardwood forests or brushy areas.



Turkey vultures return.

Turkey vultures migrate south for the winter. Vultures can look like bald eagles from a distance, but they make a "V"—for vultures—with their wings when they soar. Eagles hold their wings flat. Vultures also teeter back and forth in flight.

Look for vultures soaring in circles high in the sky.

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Snow trillium blooming.

Trilliums have three leaves, three petals, and three sepals. They are much shorter—never over 4 inches tall—than other trilliums that will bloom later in spring. Trilliums are also called birthroot, because snow trillium tea was used to relieve pain during childbirth.

Look for snow trilliums along forest floors and slopes.



Mourning cloaks out.

Adult mourning cloak butterflies overwinter under loose tree bark and thaw out when spring arrives. They often sit with their wings spread to warm up in the sunshine. The adults generally feed on oozing tree sap or rotting fruit.

Look for mourning cloaks in open woodlands.



Song sparrows return.

Song sparrows have dark streaks and a spot on their chests. They flit through thick, low vegetation on short, fluttering flights while pumping their tails down. Males sing frequently from grasses or branches at about eye level.

Look for song sparrows in marsh or forest edges, brushy draws, along field fence lines, and sometimes at birdfeeders.



Eastern phoebes return.

Eastern phoebes dart back and forth from their perches to catch flying insects with their all-black bill. They wag their tails up and down when sitting. You can find their mud/grass nests on limestone cliffs, bridges, or under house or barn eaves.

Look for Eastern phoebes in open woods, yards, and parks.



Thirteen-lined ground squirrels out.

Thirteen-lined ground squirrels have 13 lines or rows of spots on their backs. Unlike chipmunks, they are true hibernators and sleep away the winter in burrows dug below the frost line. They stand up tall to watch their surroundings before darting back down into their burrows.

Look for thirteen-lined ground squirrels along roads, pastures, or yards.

Signs of Spring in Winneshiek County

1st Week of April



Hepatica blooming.

Hepatica flowers can be white, pink, purple, or even pale blue. Any liver-shaped leaves found with the flowers are from last fall; new leaves won't emerge until the flowers fade. The flower stems are covered with a soft fuzz to help protect them from cold.

Look for clumps of hepatica flowers along woodland floors.



Scarlet cup fungus out.

Scarlet cup fungus is the first mushroom to fruit in Winneshiek County. The fungus anchors to and feeds off decaying sticks or branches buried below leaf litter or under the soil's surface. They are not considered edible.

Look for scarlet cup fungus at damp spots in deciduous forests.



Spring peepers singing.

Spring peepers are grayish-brown treefrogs with a dark cross or "X" on their back. They are very small and like to hide in dense plants, so they are difficult to see, but not at all hard to hear. Their loud call sounds like a baby chick's peeps or high-pitched sleigh bells.

Look for spring peepers in or near marshes, wetlands, or ponds.



Northern leopard frogs singing.

Northern leopard frogs are green or brown with dark spots on their backs and legs. Their call is a long, deep snore. They are a favorite food for many predators, including mink, snakes, and herons.

Look for Northern leopard frogs in or near marshes, wetlands, or ponds.



Northern flickers return.

Northern flickers are woodpeckers, but they spend a lot of time on the ground digging up ants and beetles. Look for a flash of yellow on their wings and white on their rump when they fly. Only the males have a black "mustache."

Look for Northern flickers in woodlands or open fields with scattered trees.

Signs of Spring in Winneshiek County

2nd Week of April



Spring beauty blooming.

Spring beauty flowers are only about the size of your fingernail and are lined with pink stripes. The flowers close up at night, as well as in cloudy weather to protect their pollen from rain. Their leaves look like grass.

Look for spring beauty in deciduous forests, along bluffs, and sometimes in yards near trees.



Bloodroot blooming.

Bloodroot is fairly large for a spring wildflower, but each flower only lasts for a day or two. The lobed leaf is wrapped around the flower stalk when it first emerges, but will spread out after the flower wilts. Red juice bleeds from broken stems and leaves.

Look for bloodroot in rich woods, thickets, and floodplains.



Woolly bear caterpillars out.

Woolly bears caterpillars overwinter under leaf litter. They wake up in spring and feed on plants like red or white clover, then eventually turn into an Isabella tiger moth. Their fuzzy hairs can irritate sensitive skin.

Look for woolly bears near pastures, grassy yards, parks, or trail sides.



Boreal chorus frogs singing.

Boreal chorus frogs are tiny, gray/green/olive frogs with wide, dark stripes down their backs. They are hard to see, but easy to hear. Their call sounds like a fingernail running down a comb.

Look for boreal chorus frogs near woodlands in wetlands, temporary pools of water, or ponds.



Tree swallows return.

Male tree swallows have blue-green backs and bright white bellies. Females are similarly patterned, but not as bright. They swoop acrobatically through the air to catch flying bugs.

Look for tree swallows in fields, wetlands, or birdhouses near water.