

# Signs of Spring in Winneshiek County

## 2nd Week of March



### **American robins return.**

American robins are a familiar bird and often one of the first birds that children can identify. Their bright reddish-orange belly and gray back are hard to miss. Robins prefer to eat worms and insects, but will feed on old crabapples if the ground is still frozen when they return.

Look for robins hopping along the grass in backyards, parks, or trails.



### **Eastern bluebirds return.**

Eastern bluebirds have blue backs and heads (males are bright, females are duller), a red-brown chest, and white bellies. They often nest in wooden houses put out by people and can raise more than one brood of young each year.

Look for bluebirds sitting on telephone wires, fence posts, or nest boxes



### **Canada geese heading north.**

Canada geese are noisy honkers, especially when groups fly overhead in a V-shape or when people or other dangers approach. Some geese will nest here in Winneshiek County, but others will keep heading north.

Look for Canada geese near open water, especially if it is surrounded by short grass.



### **Red-winged blackbirds return.**

Red-winged blackbird males like to be noticed, showing off their bright red and yellow shoulder patches and singing a noisy “conk-la-reeee.” The females are streaky brown and stay more hidden.

Look for red-winged blackbirds in marshes and along wet road ditches.



### **Common grackles return.**

Common grackles appear to be glossy black all over, but look closely and you’ll see their iridescent blue heads and bright yellow eyes. They eat just about everything: seeds, insects, corn and grain, even garbage.

Look for grackles walking around lawns or gathering in big, noisy groups in evergreen trees.

# 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 starts 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 they 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.

# Signs of Spring in Winneshiek County

## 4th Week of March



### **Snow trillium starts 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



### **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 starts 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 start 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.

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



### **Northern leopard frogs start 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.

Listen 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 starts 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 starts 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, and 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 start singing.**

Boreal chorus frogs are tiny, gray, green, or 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.

# Signs of Spring in Winneshiek County

## 3rd Week of April



### **Dutchman's breeches starts blooming.**

Dutchman's breeches look like little pairs of pants hung out to dry on a clothesline, above a mass of frilly green leaves. The flowers are an early nectar source for butterflies and bumblebees and wilt almost immediately if picked, so are best enjoyed by looking.

Look for dutchman's breeches in rich, deciduous woodlands or ravines.



### **Black raspberry starts leafing out.**

Black raspberry leaves have three leaflets on smooth, arching canes covered with short prickles and a waxy bloom. The canes can form dense thickets that make great habitat for birds, rabbits, and even deer. Their fruit—often called black caps—will ripen in early July.

Look for black raspberries in ditches or along field edges or trails.



### **Yellow-rumped warblers return.**

Yellow-rumped warblers are the first of the wood warblers to return north, though Winneshiek County is just a layover on their migration to northern Minnesota bogs to nest. They are active birds, often darting out from trees to catch insects.

Look for yellow-rumped warblers along woodland edges or shorelines.



### **First dragonflies start appearing.**

Some of Iowa's dragonfly species overwinter as nymphs or eggs, some migrate south, and some species do both! The common green darner is one of the earliest dragonflies to appear in the spring. Dragonfly nymphs (larvae) live entirely in the water until they transform into adults.

Look for dragonflies hunting insects above water, lawns, or prairies.



### **Ospreys return.**

Ospreys are sometimes called fish eagles because of how they dive right into the water with their feet outstretched to catch fish. The key to identifying ospreys is to look for their brown backs, white bellies, brown wrist patches, and brown eye mask.

Look for osprey near water, including rivers, lakes, and ponds.

# Signs of Spring in Winneshiek County

## 4th Week of April



### **Red-twigged dogwood starts leafing out.**

Red-twigged dogwoods are dense, rounded shrubs with a distinct red color, especially on young branches. Also called redosier dogwood, it is an important wildlife plant and makes an excellent decorative shrub.

Look for red-twigged dogwoods in ditches, by wetlands, near prairie or woodland edges, or in gardens and lawns.



### **Virginia bluebells start blooming.**

Virginia bluebells can form massive colonies, filling the air with their fragrant scent. The drooping, bell-shaped flowers start out light pink or purple before turning pale blue in full bloom. They are often visited by butterflies and moths.

Look for Virginia bluebells in floodplain forests or moist woodlands.



### **Dandelions start blooming.**

Though many consider dandelions a lawn weed, they were brought to the U.S. as a garden plant, and their leaves are edible. They are now considered naturalized and provide food for insects, birds, rabbits, and deer.

Look for dandelions in yards, gardens, and along roadsides or trails.



### **American toads start singing.**

American toads call with a very long, very high trill; they can be deafening when they call in large groups. If you hear many trilling, it's also worth looking for their eggs: long strands of transparent jelly filled with black beads floating near the top of water.

Listen for American toads near lakes, ponds, marshes, or standing water.



### **Eastern towhees return.**

Male Eastern towhees have a black head and back, rusty sides, and white undersides. For females, look for brown where the black would be. They often scratch through underbrush and grass looking for seeds or insects.

Look for Eastern towhees in shrubby, brushy areas or forest edges.

# Signs of Spring in Winneshiek County

## 1st Week of May



### **Jack-in-the-pulpit starts blooming.**

Peek under the drooping roof of this tall wildflower to see “Jack” in his pulpit. Every part of Jack-in-the-pulpit contains calcium oxalate, the same compound that gives stinging nettles their sting, so it’s not one to eat!

Look for Jack-in-the-Pulpit in rich, moist woodlands.



### **Yellow violets start blooming.**

Yellow violets are low-growing plants with heart-shaped leaves and five yellow petals. The bottom yellow petal has thin brown or purple lines on it. Many species of fritillary butterflies cannot survive without violets because their caterpillars can eat only violet leaves.

Look for yellow violets in moist woodlands or along woodland edges.



### **Morel mushrooms start emerging.**

For some, morel mushrooms are the best part of spring. The edible mushroom is the small, fruiting body of a much larger organism. As always when foraging for mushrooms, make absolute sure you know what you are picking. Use a guidebook or go with someone that knows.

Look for morels in woodlands near dead trees, often elms.



### **Baltimore orioles return.**

Though considered a blackbird, Baltimore orioles have fiery orange bellies and white bars on their wings, in addition to their black heads. Many people attract orioles to their backyards with grape jelly, but they will also visit hummingbird feeders.

Look for Baltimore orioles at backyard feeders or singing from treetops.



### **Rose-breasted grosbeaks return.**

While male rose-breasted grosbeaks have bright red spilling down their white chests, females are streaky brown and white. The “gros” in their names means “big,” and both males and females use those enormous bills to crack apart the hard shells of beetles, their favorite food.

Look for rose-breasted grosbeaks in woodlands or at feeders.

# Signs of Spring in Winneshiek County

## 2nd Week of May



### **Wild geranium starts blooming.**

Wild geranium is sometimes called alumroot and it was an important pioneer remedy for dysentery. When ripe, the seedpods burst open to catapult their seeds several feet. It also spreads by rhizome, so can form large patches.

Look for wild geranium in woodlands or shady gardens.



### **Lilacs start blooming.**

Lilacs are known for their brilliant, fragrant flowers that attract bees and butterflies. There are many cultivars available with colors from white to pink to purple. Lilacs can sucker to form thickets that provide good wildlife cover.

Look for lilacs in yards, hedges, screens, or windbreaks.



### **Gray treefrogs start singing.**

Gray treefrogs can change color at will—from mottled gray to bright green—to blend into their surroundings. Their song is a short, shrill trill. Their toepads make them excellent climbers.

Look for gray treefrogs at night along forest edges or near lighted buildings in town. During the day, they hide in crevices and plants.



### **Ruby-throated hummingbirds return.**

Ruby-throated hummingbirds use their long tongues to sip nectar out of flowers and catch tiny insects. They have iridescent green backs, but only the males have ruby throats. Their thimble-sized nests are made out of thistle or dandelion down held together with spider silk.

Look for hummingbirds at nectar feeders or hovering at flower blooms.



### **White-tailed deer fawns hiding.**

White-tailed deer fawns are reddish brown with white spots, which helps them blend in with their surroundings. They spend most of the first few weeks of their life bedded down and hiding, waiting for their foraging mothers to return. If you do find a fawn out in nature—or in your own backyard—it's best to leave it alone.

# Signs of Spring in Winneshiek County

## 3rd Week of May



### **Wild columbine starts blooming.**

Wild columbine's drooping, upside down flowers are a great nectar source for hummingbirds and bumblebees. It is usually found in shady areas, but sometimes in sunny woodlands or even prairies. There are many colored nursery cultivars, but wild columbines are always reddish. Look for columbine on rocky outcroppings and limestone ledges.



### **Garden chives start blooming.**

Garden chives are an allium—like onions, leeks, and garlic—generally grown for cooking, but they are also used as border plants or in perennial gardens. They are a good early source of nectar for pollinators and are incredibly hardy and low-maintenance.

Look for chives in herb and vegetables gardens.



### **Dandelion puffballs ready.**

When dandelions finish flowering, the flower head dries out and opens into a puffball. The parachute seeds will eventually detach from the seedhead and blow away in the wind to plant themselves somewhere new.

Look for dandelions in yards, gardens, and along roadsides or trails.



### **Mosquitos start biting.**

Mosquitos are known for feeding on blood, but they also eat nectar, aphid honeydew, and plant juices. Male mosquitos don't eat blood at all. Mosquitos—both adults and larvae—are food for everything from dragonflies and birds to bats and frogs.

Mosquitos will find you, especially if you visit deep woods or marshy, wet areas.



### **Mayapple starts blooming.**

Mayapples are unmistakable: shiny green umbrellas popping up from the ground, often in large patches. Their single white flower with a yellow center droops underneath the umbrella. Do not eat the green "apple" the flower eventually produces.

Look for mayapples in open woodlands or along woodland edges.

# Signs of Spring in Winneshiek County

## 4th Week of May



### **Highbush cranberry starts blooming.**

Highbush cranberries (actually a viburnum) are great native shrubs for both landscaping and wildlife. Their flower clusters have large, showy flowers around the edge and much smaller, fertile ones in the center. The berries are a favorite food of cedar waxwings and cardinals.

Look for highbush cranberries in fencerows, parks, or woodland edges.



### **Eastern tent caterpillar webs showing up.**

Eastern tent caterpillars build their “tent” as night protection from birds looking to snack on them. There can be hundreds of caterpillars in a single web. The caterpillars feed on the leaves of the host tree and will eventually turn into a drab, brown moth.

Look for tent caterpillar webs in wild plum, apple, or cherry trees.



### **June bugs bouncing off windows.**

There are many beetles that emerge from the ground as adults around now, but the one most often called the June bug is heavy and shiny brownish. Adults are attracted to light. They are harmless to people, though some species are considered pests to gardens and yards.

Look for June bugs around outdoor lights or bouncing off windows.



### **Luna moths out.**

Luna moths are one of the largest moths in North America. The moths emerging this time of year overwintered as pupae; as adults, they live only a day or two and don't even have working mouthparts to feed. Males have much larger antennae than females.

Look for luna moths at dusk or dawn or near a porch light at night.



### **Shooting star starts blooming.**

Most spring ephemerals—brief blooming wildflowers—are found in the woodlands, but shooting star is a prairie ephemeral. It blooms early in the year for a prairie plant and goes dormant by mid-summer, when many others prairie plants are just getting started.

Look for shooting stars in wetter tallgrass prairies.

# Signs of Spring in Winneshiek County

## 1st and 2nd Weeks of June



### **Spittlebugs abundant.**

Spittlebugs are a type of froghopper. Their bubble nests protect the young nymphs as they feed on plants by piercing the stem and sucking out plant juices. You can find them hiding inside if you gently poke the bubbles apart.

Look for spittlebug nests on plant stems in prairies and home gardens.



### **Wild roses start blooming.**

Wild rose is Iowa's official state flower, though there are actually several difficult-to-tell-apart species. Pollinators love rose blossoms and the fruit and seedpods (rosehips) can be eaten by wildlife and humans alike.

Look for wild rose in ditches, meadows, and open woodlands.



### **Cottonwood cotton dispersing.**

Eastern cottonwood is the fastest growing and largest native tree in Iowa. The "cotton" is tufted seeds, released to be spread by wind to germinate and grow away from the mother tree.

Look for cottonwoods in parks, backyards, or natural areas near water.



### **Lightning bugs start flashing.**

Lightning bugs—or fireflies depending on who you talk to—are actually beetles, well-known for their bioluminescent flashing to attract mates. Watch carefully and you might notice the different patterns of flashes unique to each species.

Look for lightning bugs in areas with limited light pollution, like open woods, prairies, lawns, or gardens.



### **Wild parsnip starts blooming.**

Wild parsnip is an invasive weed in the carrot family. Be careful around this plant: if you get the sap on your skin you will get a very severe chemical burn when it reacts with the sun. Wear long sleeves and pants if you will be in an area with wild parsnip.

Watch out for wild parsnip in ditches, pastures, and disturbed areas.