

VILLAGE VIEW

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According to the calendar, it's spring. And haven't we been lucky? With the notable exception of a week or so last month, Cape Cod has experienced its mildest winter in years. Those who, remembering recent Januaries and Februaries, invested in new snow tires last fall, may soon consider removing them.

Don't jump the gun, though; March and April have been snowy in the past and could be again. Winter's last punch may not yet have been delivered.

even so, and despite our good fortune as compared with weather striking the Midwest, we're tiring of winter and yearning for spring. Not only do we long for blue skies and warm sunny days, we're impatient to see blooming crocus, nodding tulips and daffodils, waving wands of golden forsythia, and ballooning burst of blossoms on the rhododendron and azalea plants.

Signs of winter's loosening grip are all about us ranging from dwindling woodpiles to lawns littered with twigs and branches that dropped during each blustery storm. The leaves that fell in autumn, and were raked around the evergreens, to protect the plants from alternate freezing and thawing, are now a sodden rotting mass. As they continue to decompose they'll release valuable nutrients to the plants they've sheltered all winter.

Once winter's truly finished, we'll face a rush of outdoor chores. The sticks and twigs must be raked and gathered, lawns cleared of their debris. Gardens will demand similar tending. Beneath windrows of rotting leaves, earth's most viable plants, the weeds, will be sprouting. Perennials will push new growth through the ground; annual beds must be prepared for this season's flowers.

In swamps, ferns are sending their fronds and fruiting bodies into the warm moist filtered sunlight. In marshes, rosemary starts yet another life cycle. In bogs, cranberries shed their dry dubonnet leaves and fresh green ones push their way onto each spiney twiglet.

As April twilight falls later each evening, sounds of tree frogs, pinkletinks, peepers will fill the darkness, and we shall stand still, listening. The music of these tiny harbingers of springtime holds us all in its thrall.

Noisy, too, are spring mornings; the returning birds greet each dawn with joyous acclaim. Their business, at this time, is a serious one of finding mates, building nests, producing eggs, hatching and raising their young. Territories must be defended, nest-sitters fed fledglings tended; our ears are assailed with the attendant conversation of these feathered creatures who seem to share our joy in spring's arrival.

Up rivers, brooks and streams come the alewives, the fish we often call herring. They come so thickly the water appears full of them, its surface roiled with the flashing tails and fins. Battling the down-rushing water pushing them back toward the ocean, the fish leap and jump the steps leading to their spawning grounds. Finally, with a last desperate wriggle, each reaches the quiet pools above the rocks and rapids, and there the females release billions of eggs; the males spread sperm among the eggs floating in the
of inland ponds. and the run is over.

Of the billions of infant fish that result, only millions will survive to return to the ocean; some of these will grow to maturity and, in a later spring, a relative few will return to repeat the process. Their every finny moment of life is fraught with danger. If the turtle or the frog doesn't gobble them up, the voracious seagull may.

Were it not so there would be a population explosion amongst the fishes; the seas would boil and stink with dead and starving fish. The balance of fish to fishfood is nicely tuned. Just as the balance between plants needing decayed leaves from which to obtain nutrients for the new season's growth is ideally arranged, as the frog's dependence upon the appearance of spawning alewives is preordained, as mosquito larvae provide sustenance for fishes, so too does each species become food for some other and each depends on yet another for survival.

Most of the animal world is carnivorous, and although the plant world is not it still takes sustenance from dead and decaying plants and animals. Bees and butterflies are the only creatures coming to mind that take their meals without destroying the source and while actually providing a vital service to their hosts. Without nectar-gathering activities, plants needing cross-pollination for reproduction would be barren.

Yes, spring is in the air. A walk through the woodland will confirm it. The high-bush blueberries bear swollen red leafbuds. White pine trees are growing new candles at their branch-tips. Dogwood buds, though still black and tight, are fat and thick. On the rhododendrons the flowering buds are readily distinguishable from those destined to produce new

leaves and this summer's growth. Oak trees that held their leaves all year are releasing them as the new ones push their way to birth.

The air itself, still chilly, raw and damp, may yet carry some snowflakes and is sure to bring raindrops as March growls our and April patters in upon its heels.

The ice is gone from the ponds; the geese are back in the rushes; robins bounce, searching earthworms; flickers explore old ant hills and find fresh ones; every living thing is bursting, nesting, building anew, reviving and fulfilling the age-old promise.

And how warmly we welcome each sign of the coming season! Even though our winter was mild, even though spring's arrival means a return to outdoor chores and gardenwork, even though we know summer will follow with traffic tie-ups, lawn-mowing, too many summer tourists, too many hot humid days in July and August, we all greet spring with enthusiasm. Strangers exchange smiles, even words about the weather; old friends exchange greet one another with joy; glad they are sharing their mutual pleasure; lovers dream and build memories together.

Taking off the snow tires is but one signal we've made it through another winter and may now unbundle from heavy coats, find relief from heating bills, put up the storm windows and install the screens, store boots, mittens and mufflers, and break out our summer wardrobes.

All about us we have nature's message: spring is on its way. Step outside and look. Smell. Listen.

Isn't it a miracle?