



May 3, 2007

Eye on the Environment: Decades of Aprils

By Steve Lamar for the Seeley-Swan Pathfinder

In our particular nook of Swan Valley, our house is near many wet meadows, marshes, and ponds that are part of a larger wetland complex that extends over much of the Swan Valley. This complex of wet meadows, pothole ponds, lakes, creeks, and river makes the Swan Valley very diverse with a multitude of plant and wildlife species. While living within this variety of habitats, I have observed a multitude of daily interactions through three decades of Aprils.

As the April temperatures increase, so does the corresponding wildlife activity. When the wet meadows, pothole ponds, and lower elevation lakes begin to melt, the return of the migratory species gains momentum. Around our place the Canada geese return and the resulting goose music becomes common. Who needs an alarm clock when there are Canada geese nearby that begin their music at the crack of dawn each morning? Add to the ensemble several sandhill cranes, various ducks and songbirds and things get too noisy to sleep. It makes for a good excuse to get up and go for an early morning walk.

On nearby waters, the courtship and mating activities of the various duck species are in full swing in April. The male mallards always seem to outnumber the females around our neighboring wetlands. This makes for a lot of fighting and chasing about the area. Several pairs of buffleheads, hooded mergansers, and ring-neck ducks nest on the nearby waters. Wood ducks occasionally use the nest box that I put up more than twenty years ago. Wood ducks will sometime engage in a practice called 'egg dumping' when one female will enter the nest and lay eggs on top of the resident female's eggs while the resident female is away feeding. I witnessed the results of this practice in the 1990s when I saw a male and female wood duck with a line of 24 small ducklings swimming along behind. The predators wasted little time in noticing the abundance of prey. The number of ducklings decreased with each new sighting. The total was down to six the last time I saw them as a family unit.

While standing on the front porch of our house one day, I watched as two mallards in the wet meadow became very agitated. Their quacking became very loud and vocal. I could not figure out what was bothering them, when out of the sky a bald eagle dive-bombed toward them. The mallards easily avoided the attack, quickly flushing and maneuvering away from the eagle.

Thirty years ago, sandhill cranes were pretty rare around our area, but have since increased in numbers to the point where they are now fairly common. They are a 'watchdog' type of bird. They are always alert and very vocal when there are intrusions in their territory.

During the first ten years that I lived at this location, the American bitterns and great blue herons were a common sight. One day, five great blue herons and two American bitterns were feeding in the wet meadow at dusk. They seemed to have disappeared for a ten-year period with only a rare sighting. Thankfully, in recent years the trend has reversed itself. Last year, I observed bittern parents with two young ones feeding often in the wet meadow. The American bittern has a distinctive primordial call. The bittern throws its head back while making a sound similar to a booming, 'glunk, glunk'. It is a large bird that can hide amazingly well in the cattails.

Frequently, northern harriers (marsh hawks) visit the wetlands. Their white rump patch is a common identifying characteristic. Although they usually glide around the openings low to the surface and diving down to nab their prey, I once watched as a northern harrier tried to get into a large nest of sticks perched high on top of an old growth ponderosa pine tree. A raven was in the nest fighting off the northern harrier. I wondered whose nest it really was and which was the actual predator that day. Had the hawk left its nest only to be robbed by the raven or was it a raven nest with the hawk trying to run the raven off so that it could get to the young or the eggs? A quick look in a field guide straightened me out, as apparently northern harriers are ground nesters.

Owls are usually present around our area in April. We often have great horned, great gray, northern saw-whet, and pygmy owls.

Some grizzly bear sign starts to show up in April. We occasionally see prints in the mud or snow, but rarely see the actual animal this time of the year. We usually don't see much black bear sign around our place until May.

As the snows melt exposing the elk sedge on the dryer slopes near these wet areas, the elk move into the area and feed heavily on it. Later in April when things have greened up, elk can be seen standing knee deep in the pothole pond feeding on the emerging vegetation. They put their head underwater to nip at the vegetation, reminding me of moose behavior.

Surprisingly, I have not seen many moose in what appears to be good moose habitat in the area. In the past thirty years I have seen moose only once a year at best. Last year in mid-summer, a cow moose and a newborn calf walked through the wet meadow.

Another 'wildlife' species that usually starts to become noticeable around our place in April is the mosquito. Although mosquitoes are considered a pest to humans they are nevertheless important to many birds and fish. In particular, the tree swallows key in on this abundant food source in our area as they dart around the wet meadow at amazing

speeds gorging on mosquitoes. As we seem to have more than our share of mosquitoes, I usually cheer the tree swallows on with words of encouragement.

April would not be April in our area without the return of the common snipe (recently renamed Wilson's snipe). The snipe, during courtship, will fly in a loop-like fashion up into the sky, then dive, swooping in an exaggerated arc back to close the loop. On the descent the noise emanating from the wind through its tail feathers sounds like winnowing 'huhuhuhuhu'. It's a unique sound that I never tire of hearing.

As yet another April comes to a close, the spring renewal of life in Swan Valley is once again upon us. Look, listen, and enjoy.