

APRIL 1 - 14, 2017 NATURAL HISTORY NOTES FOR EASTVIEW

By Dick Harlow

AMERICAN ROBIN



American Robin, *Turdus migratorius*, male,
© Dick Harlow

What better forerunner of spring than our iconic American Robin a member of the Thrush Family. This fellow used to be called Robin-red-breast, or just Robin, but those who are interested in bird taxonomy felt that the common name Robin was being used too loosely. Confusion rested in the use of the word Robin to define both the Robin in Europe and the Robin in the United States. Now the Robin of North America is called the American Robin. The interesting point here is that the American Robin belongs to the Thrush family of birds, while the European Robin is an Old World flycatcher, not related to Thrushes at all!

As its species name indicates it is migratory! What? We see Robins in the winter, how is it migratory? Please understand that the American Robin is found in almost the whole of North America including Mexico. Therefore, Robins that nest here in summer are actually wintering further south; and Robins that nest in Northern Canada are the ones we see on our winterberry and crabapple trees during winter.

The abundance of American Robins is due to its proclivity to human habitation. They will sing in our apple tree early in the morning,

nest in a tree next to our bedroom window and find earthworms in our lawn. They will usually nest twice during the year, being the earliest to develop an open nest in the spring, usually nesting in a conifer first and then in a leafed out deciduous tree for the second nest.



American Robin, *Turdus migratorius*, male,
© Dick Harlow

The diet of the American Robin is made up of an assemblage of earthworms, beetle grubs and caterpillars during the summer. While during the winter it will feed on fruits such as crabapples and berries. The American Robin here at EastView is usually seen in the winter or early spring. Although, robins will be seen during the summer months, particularly looking for insects in our garden soil, EastView's clay soils make it tough for them to find earthworms and other reliable food. That doesn't mean earthworms and grubs aren't there, it's just very difficult for Robins to find them.

The American Robin will congregate in large flocks during winter and are very observant of predators. However, during the spring and summer when their time is taken up with nest building and taking care of their young, they are much more subject to being caught by raptors, cats and snakes. An interesting fact here is that the brood parasite, the Brown-headed Cowbird, is not very

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successful laying its eggs in a Robin's nest. Ornithologists have observed that Robins, who lay blue eggs, reject the larger whitish-creamy and brown-flecked egg of the Cowbird. They just kick it out of the nest!

SPRING

The first day of spring in the Northern Hemisphere is determined when the Spring Equinox begins. In 2017 the Spring Equinox began at 06:28 AM Eastern Time on March 20. From March 20 to June 21, (the beginning of the summer solstice) this period represents our spring, that time during the year when life begins anew!



Melting snow showing evergreen Marginal Wood Fern, *Dryopteris marginalis*, © Dick Harlow

Once the ground begins to thaw and soil water becomes available, plant life is activated! Maple trees with deep roots have already stirred and the sugar water or the substance that makes maple syrup has been flowing.

Even though **January** had a few very cold days, much of the month was warmer and drier than normal. We had bare ground, some light snow, light rain and ice in our part of the Champlain Valley.

February began cold with snow flurries and more snow in the mountains. Then by the middle of the month we received the most

snow we have had since 2015. By the 14th of February our ground was covered with more than 10 inches of the white stuff. Then, we had an unbelievably warm trend with temperatures reaching high 40's and 50's even reaching into the 60's, melting a great deal of the snow cover. Our retention ponds became free of ice.

March was warm initially, but cooled and a few days were really cold. Then "Stella" pounced on us, a record snowstorm on the 14th. After the storm we had variable weather with normal to below normal temperatures, more seasonal. But, the last day of the month March decided to go out like a lion, more snow and freezing temperatures!



Seed heads of Sensitive Fern, *Onoclea sensibilis*, © Dick Harlow

Spring warmth melts snow cover and initiates thaw so that plant life can begin to stir. Seed stalks containing seed heads that

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carried through the winter will break open, drop new seed or spores which fall to the ground and germinate forming a new generation.

This is the time of year that everyone looks forward to, the new greening of our environment, a feeling of newness and revitalization. It's probably why we all look forward to the first daffodil or crocus, seeing a spring ephemeral, the development of new grass in the meadow or knowledge that the young birds and animals will be forthcoming in the coming months. A lovely time of year!

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RED TRILLIUM



Wake-robin, *Trillium erectum*, © Dick Harlow

Red Trillium also known as Wake-robin, or Beth Root, or Stinking Benjamin is found in the Northeast. This plant is a spring ephemeral and is quite abundant around Vermont. The name Wake-robin comes from the red flower petals in early spring like the red breast of the American Robin. The lesser-known name of Stinking Benjamin comes from the fact that the flower is pollinated by flies, and as the flower matures it smells like rotting meat. We tend to look at flowers in a positive manner, which is probably why we prefer to call it either

Wake-robin or Red Trillium.

Characteristically all trilliums have their plant parts in three's, i.e. three petals, three leaves, etc. It is a spring ephemeral because it can tolerate very low freezing temperatures and yet break ground in early spring. When it breaks ground it will develop into this beautiful deep red three-petalled flower while the rest of the forest floor is working hard to emerge from winter.

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COMMON FERN MOSS



Delicate Fern Moss, *Thuidium delicatulum*, © Dick Harlow

Mosses are a difficult group of plants to identify. We are lucky here at EastView, as we do not have a lot of shade to contend with. Therefore, there are only a few sun-loving mosses one needs to worry about if you are bent on trying to identify them. But, this particular moss is pretty and delicate and I would like to introduce it to you.

When seeing which species you might have in your hand or from the picture you took, it can be rather frustrating. Many times you need a microscope, along with reference material, to help you with a particular species. Although I find them difficult, I also find them challenging which piques my interest.

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This particular species is called the Delicate or Common Fern Moss, *Thuidium delicatulum*. Especially notice, in the close-up picture, the strong stem from which fernlike projections protrude. An interesting key to its identification is the change in the color green. This moss will change from dark green to a lime green as the season progresses from late Summer to Fall and into Winter. Dark green late Spring to early Fall. Lime green from Fall to Winter.



Closer Look, **Delicate Fern Moss**, *Thuidium delicatulum*, © Dick Harlow

This is, as are many mosses, a shade tolerant to shade loving plant. You can find it on the moist or wet and shaded forest floor around dead decaying tree stumps or fallen limbs. You also can find mats of it on large stones or boulders. It really is a handsome moss.

Ornithologists have found that some songbirds seem to prefer this moss when they are constructing their nests, e.g. American Robin, Cedar Waxwing, Eastern Phoebe, Northern Catbird, Barn Swallow and various Vireo species. Along with many invertebrates that use this type of moss-mat environment. There are also various other small vertebrates that use it to nest in or to live under for protection e.g. various species of salamanders.

OBSERVATIONS

MAMMALS

Gray Squirrel - 3+ individuals
Eastern Cottontail - track, scat, tail remains
Meadow Vole - tracks and individual

Weather Tidbits

Month of APRIL 1-14, 2017

[All Measurements taken at solar noon \(1230 EST\).](#)

PRECIPITATION

Total Precipitation: 56.0 mm or 2.2 inches

Overcast Days: 6

TEMPERATURE

Mean Temp: 7.7 C°/45.9°F

High Temp: 24.4 C°/75.9°F

Low Temp: -3.1 C°/-26.4°F

DAYS

MAX <0.0 C° 0 DAYS

MIN >0.0 C° 4 DAYS

MAX <-18.0 C° 0 DAYS