

## Spring is in the Air with Birds and Bugs



Are you enjoying the return of migrating birds? Their songs and calls herald the return of spring. But what about bugs? Who's cheering them on?

**WRITTEN BY ROSEANNE VAN EE,  
WILDBC FACILITATOR**

*Roseanne is our long-time facilitator in Vernon. She enthusiastically shares her vast knowledge of the outdoors to help teachers and leaders experience and enjoy nature. Follow her on Facebook for more.*

They herald spring too. In fact, it's the insects' emergence, as the sun warms the ground and trees, that attract the migratory birds back north. Even our bats return or become active for insect meals.

Did you know that butterflies, moths, flies and spiders overwinter as adults by hibernating under bark, in duff or soil in our forests and fields? Many other insects overwinter as eggs or larvae in forest litter, soil or water. Insects are "cold-blooded". They don't have a warming metabolism and require the sun's warmth to get them going. That's why early and late season insects are sluggish.

Spring's intense sun warms tree bark triggering **beetle** eggs to develop into larvae and awakening other insects overwintering under bark. Woodpeckers can hear the juicy critters move and are often seen actively drilling holes or pulling off loose bark to feast. Chickadees and other winter resident forest birds are checking out nesting cavities while having a heyday heralding the return of spring.

The first insect arrivals might come indoors – **ants**. They overwinter underground or in dead wood, then come into and around buildings as soon as the days get warm

enough for them to move. These opportunists are seeking warmth and food. Besides plant nectar and aphids, ants will clean up other insects, sweet or starchy food and garbage.

**Butterflies** are always a delight to see in the spring. Mourning Cloaks overwinter as adults tucked under tree bark or in wood crevices. That's why you see them in early spring and in the fall. There's a number of other butterflies and moths that overwinter, too.

Like many songbirds, the Monarch, Painted Ladies, Red Admirals, Zebra Swallowtails and more migrate from wintering grounds of the American southwest and even Mexico. Monarchs are now quite rare in BC because their host plant, the Showy Milkweed, has been decimated. Most people mistake the large, showy yellow and black swallowtails as Monarchs.

Butterflies are big and bright enough to watch with binoculars. Spring days make great butterfly viewing as they spend more time open-winged capturing the sun's warmth. Their wings act like solar panels, absorbing heat to give them enough energy to move on.

There are over 400 species of native **bees** in BC. Most are solitary and don't form hives. Bumblebees, and a few others, form small nests in cavities of dead wood or hollow stems. But over 70% of our native bees spend most of their lives underground in tunnels. They have a short life span (only a few weeks) and have a short foraging range of only 100 – 200 metres from their nesting sites. Unlike honey bees, native bees collect mostly pollen and do not produce surplus honey. Except for bumble bees, native bees don't sting. Honey bees are introduced agricultural livestock in Canada. Beekeepers own and take care of them.

Probably the noisiest spring insect is the **cicada**; a large fly-like, but docile critter who's commonly heard buzzing or clicking in dry forest trees. They live as a grub for three to five years underground, then crawl out, climb up and cling onto low shrubs to molt in the spring. A close look at an empty, molted shell of the nymph reveals amazing little crab-like claws. Kids love seeing these.



*Molted Cicada shell*

Many **flies** overwinter as larvae in water or decaying matter. Anything rotting will arouse and attract them if there's enough warmth for them to move. Mayflies, stoneflies, dragonflies and damselflies are stirring as voraciously hungry larvae in pond water. In spring, mature larvae will climb out of the water, molt and fly off to breed, then basically become bird food in summer.

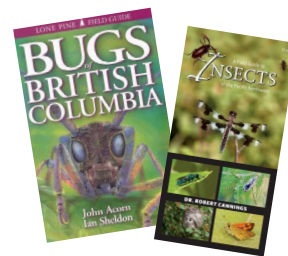
If you're skiing, snowshoeing or hiking at high elevations in spring, watch for Scorpion Flies and Snow Crane flies walking across your path. Snow Fleas look like pepper jumping around on the snow. The occasional Snow Mosquito, who's lifecycle is based around subalpine bogs, might be seen flying by too.

**Ladybug** larvae overwinter under bark and leaves and are voracious aphid eaters at this stage. Believe it or not, some ladybugs fly up to snuggle deep into rocky mountaintop crevices for the winter. They don't emerge until June.

There are about 35,000 species of **invertebrates** (insects, spiders, mites, ticks, worms, etc.) in B.C. Most of them are ecologically helpful by pollinating plants, decomposing decaying material and aerating the ground. But, some of them really do bug us – like ticks. Learn how to deal with these if you're hiking in dry grassland areas. Otherwise, happy **bug** watching!

### A couple great bug books:

- *Bugs of British Columbia* by John Acorn and Ian Sheldon. A Lone Pine publication – quite informative with stunning illustrations. Enjoyable to read and appeals to all ages.
- *A Field Guide to Insects of the Pacific Northwest* by Robert Cannings – BC's leading entomologist. This laminated, foldout guide to various insect groups is portable, inexpensive and easy to start with and use.



### Speakers and resources:

- Your community's Naturalist Club may have an entomology group (AKA buggers) [www.bcnature.ca](http://www.bcnature.ca)
- Museums and nature centres often have entomology collections

## Safety

If any insects or spiders get indoors, trap them in a cup, slip a paper under the brim, and return them to the great outdoors. Keep a clear plastic cup handy so you can have fun observing the bug.

Never pick up a spider barehanded as they all have venom; usually not enough to harm us, but their bites can be nasty and get infected.

## Neat bug watching activities:

- Turn over rocks or logs, or gently dig in soft dirt – you'll be unveiling a mystery. You can often find bugs, slugs and maybe even a salamander. Once you've had a good look, return everything to how it was. Think of it as closing the door. Use moist wipes or gel to clean your hands.
- Start a naturescape project at school to attract pollinators. Check out HCTF Education's Resource Room with Naturescape for schools information: <https://www.hctfeducation.ca/lessons/outdoors-projects-and-places/>
- Look for "Create a pollinator-friendly garden for the birds, bees and butterflies" at [www.davidsuzuki.org](http://www.davidsuzuki.org)
- Say NO! to toxic insecticides and pesticides - They contain poisons that can be transferred to insectivores such as birds, bats, small mammals, reptiles, amphibians, fish and invertebrates. They often end up in our food and can pollute our water, air and soil. Let's encourage our future scientists to develop nontoxic solutions!