

Listening for signs of spring

Discovering the abundant sounds of the season in a walk through a Portage park

PORTAGE PARK DISTRICT



GREEN PORTAGE

Emiliss Rickis

At some point in early March (or earlier) we yearn for warmer weather and the promise of springtime. As daylight lengthens and after dinner walks become more numerous, we look for the first signs of the coming season, searching for anything green or moving in the landscape.

We can also listen for the signs of spring. Using our ears and learning to recognize the many sounds out there enhances our awareness of what is around us. With this as our guide, let us take a short walk along the edge of the woods and by a small pond in Seneca Ponds, a Portage Park District park in Streetsboro.

The evening is warm for this time of year and the countryside is alive with the sounds of frogs.

A small vernal pond is filled with a cacophony of what sounds like chickens clucking or small dogs yipping. These wood frogs are minuscule amphibians that are silent except for a day or two in early spring when the mating season drags them from a winter-long lethargy. The sound can be deafening.

On the other side of the path we hear loud "peeping" coming from a small wetland surrounded by cattails and sedges. The spring peeper is another tiny frog whose unmistakable call gives the peeper its name.

Sometimes we can hear another song that sounds roughly like someone running their finger up the teeth of a comb. This is the signature song of the western chorus frog, usually found in similar habitats as the other frogs but in fewer numbers. Listen carefully to discern the difference in the two songs. All of these frogs are in the tree frog family, a group of native frogs that seldom exceed one and a half inches in length.

At the edge of the pond we can also hear a high trill that lasts several seconds and can be joined by others as the American toad calls to a mate. All of these calls can be going on simultaneously.

Learning to recognize bird songs is a real advantage when walking in springtime. Birds are fun to observe, particularly in spring when, during mating season, the bright colors of the males are highly visible. Knowing the song allows us to get close enough to visually identify the individual we are

seeking. Some songs are quite unique and easily identified like those of the crow, the blue jay and the cardinal. But many are indistinguishable and require a great deal of listening. Wood warblers, in particular, have a myriad of similar sounding songs that require much practice to easily distinguish one from another.

Birds are most vocal in the early morning or evening during April through mid- to late May. Once nesting season is in full swing, the number of songs lessens, but there are species who sing all day all through the summer.

One of the most spectacular of the spring rituals is the courtship display of the woodcock.

A relative of the plovers, this chunky little bird performs an absolutely dizzying aerial flight in the hours after dusk. Leaving the "peenting" ground, usually a damp and brushy meadow, the woodcock (sometimes called timberdoodle or bogsucker) takes off skyward in an ever tightening spiral, wings whistling as it ascends two hundred or more feet into the sky. At the top of the ascent, it drops earthward like a falling leaf, twittering all the way, until landing within a few feet from where the flight began minutes before. This activity can continue all night from mid-March to mid-May. Because it occurs in the dark, our ears are more important than our eyes.

From the sound of ice breaking up on a windy day to the echo of woodpeckers tapping on trees, there is so much to hear in nature; and so much to discover. Go out to one of the Portage Parks, cock your head, listen closely, and enjoy.

Retired after 35 years as a preserve manager for the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Emiliss Rickis is now out haunting a forest, field, or wetland near you. Green Portage is a monthly feature in the Record-Courier.

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