

Prognosticators of Spring

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

This week was Groundhog Day. I find it fascinating the attention that this large member of the squirrel family receives and how many people trust a rodent, that should still be in hibernation, to predict if we will have an “early” spring or not. By the way, his success rate is less than 40%. You’re better off to just flip a coin!

Much to many resident’s surprise, we do have woodchucks, a.k.a. groundhogs in Geary County. They aren’t common, but they are around, usually being found along the edges of wooded areas nest to streams and rivers. They are in hibernation at this time but will start getting active in about another month. Now that you know how I feel about rodents predicting the weather though, what are some harbingers of spring? All of you that know me can tell where this is going, but of course, to me, the real prognosticators of spring are birds, but perhaps not the ones you are thinking of!

Many people feel that when they see and hear robins singing, then spring is back. Well, the problem with this is that robins are in our area all year round. They may not be in your yard, but they are still here. The robins that are here in the summer do leave in the fall and head to points further south. Many of the robins that we have here now will go further north in another month or so. Robins, along with bluebirds, gather up in fairly large groups in the winter and head to the stands of cedar trees, hackberry trees or any trees that are retaining a fruit like seed. Once the frost is out of the ground and the weather starts to warm up the soil, the worms will be active and you’ll find them foraging in your yard once again. Until then, a heated bird bath may be the only way to get them into your yard.

Other folks rely on the migration of waterfowl, especially geese, to signal the changing seasons. Which prompts many questions locally each winter, and especially this year, about why are the geese heading back north already. Some species of birds are driven to migrate to a certain location every fall to spend the winter and to a certain location each spring to nest. Many of our smaller songbirds are like that. Most of our hummingbirds head to southern Mexico and northern Central America for the winter.

Other species are not so driven to a specific location, but rather, they are driven to go no further south than what they have to to find food for the winter. Geese are in this category. As long as there is open water for them to roost on at night and food to be found in fields, they’ll stick around until March when lengthening days will push them back north. Then there’s also the growing permanent Canada Goose population that is present locally. Those birds never leave!

If you really want an indicator of spring look to things like the Eastern Phoebe, a small brownish flycatcher. On average they return to our area around March 14th. Or maybe the Franklin’s Gull. These are the seagulls we often see by the hundreds in the fields in the fall and spring. They usually return a little later, about the 28th of March.

But if you really want to know the bird that I call the prognosticator of spring (drum roll please), it’s the Turkey Vulture! Over the past 25 years the vultures start returning around St. Patrick’s Day. Since they need to feed on decaying flesh, they don’t return until it is warming up enough for dead animals to start rotting. Once the Turkey Vultures start floating over head, THEN I know that spring is finally here!