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Conservator

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Seasons of the Marsh column-Spring

By Bruce Masterman

The transformation is magical. One day, the marsh is frozen and quiet. Just a few days later, it seems, the ice is almost gone and the place is abuzz with wondrous sights and sounds of spring.

Paired off for mating, the first of the returning Canada geese jealously and loudly protect their turf, furiously hissing and charging after all interlopers, regardless of whether they pose a genuine threat. Even muskrats with rapidly wiggling hairless tails must hurry to escape.

Redheads, northern pintails, teal and ruddy ducks paddle furtively among the cattails, watching warily above them for the northern harrier they know is skimming just over the tops of the vegetation, ready to suddenly dive for its dinner. Out on the uplands, wary mallards waddle through the high grasses as they check out potential nest sites safe from enemies wild and not.

Hundreds of Franklin's gulls and their larger cousins, the California gull, cry raucously while circling above the water. From far away comes the sound of approaching Canada geese, excitedly har-onking their imminent arrival to their brethren already on the water. A bald eagle watches from its perch on a skeletal shoreline poplar. Piercing yellow eyes scan the action, hopefully searching for a faltering wing beat or other weakness that might signal an easy meal.

Compared to the icy tomb of winter, the marsh in early spring is a busy place indeed. And it becomes even busier as the longer days warm the water and vegetation grows green and lush. Before that has a chance to happen, Mother Nature has a tendency to play a cruel joke on her creatures by blanketing the marsh in a late snowfall.

The gulls vanish, flying off to friendlier climes until the snow melts. Geese and ducks bravely hang tough, seemingly accepting the hardship and instinctively knowing that one day the snow and cold will be gone for good. Soon, their eggs hatch and downy peeping puffballs emerge into a strange new world of life and -- for many -- death.

As the spring drama continues, red-winged and yellow-headed blackbirds arrive to sing and flit about in the cattails. Then grebes face off in showy courtship dances. Finally it is late spring and shorebirds -- curlew, godwit, snipe, avocet and sandpiper -- take the stage, haunting the shallows in search of plants and insects.

Belle hates springtime. During late summer, autumn and winter, my Lab-retriever crossbreed runs free -- just a whistle away -- as she sniffs coyote scat, flushes pheasants and futilely chases the odd white-tailed jackrabbit. When the water's open, Belle is in it more than she's out.

But from April to August, when there's so much for a dog to see and do, she is attached to a leash, forced to heel and otherwise stay under tight control. She doesn't like it, but that's the way it has to be.

The springtime marsh is fragile, more so than in any other season. Ironically, it's also a time when more and more people come to visit, to watch birds, take photographs,

walk, jog and otherwise shake off winter's emotional and physical mantle. History has shown that increased use can be harmful to any natural environment, especially when it's done irresponsibly.

Accordingly, we treat the marsh differently in spring. We tread more cautiously, stay on established trails, and avoid getting too close to nests or young birds. We don't want to frighten adult birds off nests or risk separating them from their broods, which makes the young easy prey for foxes, gulls, hawks and other predators -- including unleashed pet dogs.

What happens in the marsh in spring has a direct bearing on the rest of the year. Human behavior, weather, habitat and a dozen other factors translate into successful breeding of waterfowl and other wildlife.

Spring on the marsh is more than just a season. It's a feeling -- of hope and promise and renewal. It's a time of replenishment for wild species and human spirit.

Belle may not understand that, but we must.

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