

THE JOYS OF SPRING

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Spring has sprung! How do I know? Because the frogs in the water garden are singing their little lungs out. Ray and I appreciate their joyous chorus all the more because of the time when their singing stopped. We were far too quick to blame grandson Gabe—toucher of fishes and chaser of frogs—when an inspection showed that the frogs had abandoned their lily pads.

But we soon learned, working in the yard, that the paucity of frogs wasn't Gabe's fault. While Ray hoed the hostas, I weeded the flowers that line the stone walk around the water garden. Shortly after I shifted my efforts to a front yard flower bed, Ray—hoe in hand—jogged around the corner of the house saying, "You need to be very careful." I assumed with some asperity that he was cautioning me not to pull up his precious flowers, mistaking them for weeds (it's been done), until he urged me to "come see what I killed by the water garden."

Even if you are one who believes in the sanctity of reptilian life, you have to admit that a water snake is one of God's ugliest and meanest creatures. A dull gray, the snake in question lay in four fat foot-long segments—a perfect example of the folly of even a large snake trying to take on a startled man armed with a hoe.

While snakes, as a general rule, do not have much range of facial expression, Ray swears that this one had a murderous look in its eyes as it attacked him when he walked by its hiding place in the flowers bordering the water garden. So Ray, who once carried a frog across the road to keep it from being run over, remains unrepentant about the fatal outcome of his self-defensive action against the snake. And you can't blame him. He always did like frogs best.

Another reason we know that spring has arrived is because, for the third April in a row, our deranged female cardinal has begun flinging herself at the windows looking out on the deck. She'll perch on the deck railing, fly at a window, smack into the glass at the top and deliberately bang into it all the way down to the bottom sill. Then she'll hop on the deck railing and do it again . . . over and over and over until the humans inside the house are almost as batty as the bird outside.

Sometimes her mate joins her on the deck. Thankfully, he only watches and doesn't participate in her bizarre behavior. He'll tilt his crimson-crested head to the side and you can almost hear him mutter, in bird language, "What an idiot!" Cardinals, I am

told, mate for life. I'm pretty sure that this particular male cardinal must fervently hope she'll finally kill herself so that, as a bereaved widower, he can re-mate with a saner wife.

The red-winged blackbirds frequenting the feeder are another sign that spring is here. I credit the cattails in the water garden for attracting them. And the dull olive green on the goldfinches' breasts is changing to bright yellow. Either that, or the green-colored birds are leaving our area and the yellow-colored ones are arriving. Only an ornithologist would know for sure.

In another rite of spring, I am secretly filling the bird feeders each morning to hide from Ray the fact that the coons are robbing them of sunflower seeds during the night. I caught sight of one the other evening when I heard a bumping on the deck and turned on the lights. The medium-sized coon felt so guilty when his thievery was exposed that he didn't linger, an unusual raccoon reaction as most of those masked critters simply brazen it out and dare you to do something about it.

The something Ray does is trap them and release them in another location. However, we've discovered that he has not been transporting them far enough from their preferred habitat. Lassie-like, they keep finding their way home.

So, while I welcome the flora (crocuses, daffodils, tulips, magnolias, lilacs and forsythia) that are brightly and fragrantly blooming, it is the sounds, sights and movement of the fauna (frogs, birds, raccoons and other small furry mammals) that delight me and tell me spring is truly here.

Indeed it is! Let's glory in the season!