

Back Trails

Perspectives on People and Nature

The Colors of Spring

by Reba Wynn Laks

If you ask people what color comes to mind when they think of spring, most will probably answer “green.” Yet spring has a variety of colors.

In early spring, one of the most prominent colors in New York’s eastern woodlands is red. Before the

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woods really “green up,” blossoms of the red maple tree add a definite rouge tinge to the landscape. Back in the woods, the shiny, red-tinted leaves of poison ivy sprout from their vines, although they will turn green as the season progresses. Wake robin trillium hides its rusty red head downwards, while the red and white of its cousin, painted trillium, is much more flamboyant. Skunk cabbage’s early wine-colored buds peer out of wetlands, while red peony shoots pop up out of the ground in cultivated flower beds.

As spring is also the season of romance, a number of male birds flaunt their red plumage to attract potential mates. In wetlands, male red-winged blackbirds stake out their territory, attempting to entice females by singing “konk-a-ree” and flashing their red epaulets. In upland areas, the male wild turkey fans out his tail and struts his stuff, sporting bright red and blue mating colors on his head.

Before long, the red in the landscape is overtaken by the bursting explosion of varying shades of green.

Skunk cabbage’s broad leaves eclipse its previous red flowers, the grass greens up, onion grass sprouts upward and trees begin to open their buds. Spring woodland wildflowers rush to bloom before the trees’ emerging leaves block out the sun’s rays overhead.

Soon, yellows, purples, browns, pinks and oranges join nature’s

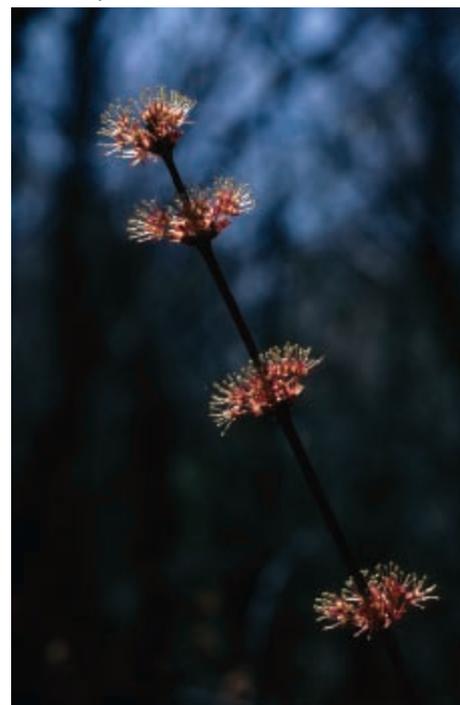
assortment of forest colors. Bright accents fill the woods: the trout lily’s yellow, bloodroot’s and Dutchman’s breeches’ white, violets’ purple, and the spring beauties’ delicate candy stripes. A mourning cloak butterfly glides through the open woods, exposing the pale yellow on the edging of its wings. The dark winter coat of deer is replaced by a rich brown. On the first warm, rainy night, spotted salamanders make their way to breeding ponds. Their yellow-spotted black bodies thrash about in a mating frenzy. By dawn, they are gone with only their jellied egg masses left behind to indicate their presence. In the streams, native brook trout flash pink. In the treetops, migrant warblers are easier to spot before the leaves are fully out. Like bright jewels flitting about from tree limb to tree limb, yellow-rumped, black-throated blue, orange blackburnian warblers and American redstarts add their colors to the palette of the woods. The white petals of shadbush and dogwood stand out among the dark trunks. All are interwoven into the multicolored fabric of the spring eastern woodlands.

In fields, bluebirds have returned to nest boxes. Additional yellow touches the countryside, as patches of coltsfoot stick their heads up along roads and field edges. Daffodils, forsythia and dandelion flowers grace gardens and lawns. Pink cherry blossoms and pink and white magnolia blossoms appear in yards and villages. In orchards, the apple

trees, their blossoms white with a touch of pink, begin to flower. Spring, in all its colors, is well on its way.

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Red maple flowers



Frank Knight

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