

ON THE WILDSIDE

A week of wildlife observations

Kathleen Ebert-Zawasky

Spring is a great time to watch for wildlife in Norton. Just within the last week, we have seen so many newly arrived or newly emerged wild ones in our yard and neighborhood.

One day, much to my surprise, I looked out the kitchen window and saw a fox standing in the yard. It was very alert and seemed to be deciding whether it should cross the street in front of our house or take another route. It studied the situation and decided not to continue in this direction, it turned around and headed back into the woods. I am not sure if it was a red fox, but given its size I guess it was since gray foxes are a little smaller.

For several wet and rainy days, we had a great view of a cardinal nest in the rhododendron near a front window. Two tiny baby birds had hatched before we even found the nest. Once we found it, we kept vigil. Both male and female parents fed the chicks. The female did more than feed the chicks, however. A few times after feeding her brood, I saw her pick up a little white packet and take it away. She was removing the wastes from the nest, keeping it nice and clean.

Finally, on Friday, the sun came out. I immediately thought I would have a better view of the nest so I hurried to the window. I could not find the nest! I couldn't believe it. But soon, the mystery was solved: from another window I could see the nest on the sidewalk. Some predator had taken it from the bush and destroyed the chicks. We were pretty sad about it for a while but understand that these things happen – just a part of the complex interdependent life cycles of our wild neighbors.

We were soon distracted by the clear musical sound of a pair of orioles zipping around – faster than the eye can focus. We have been hearing them recently but they have been hard to really get a good look at. Maybe I will get a better look at them when they settle down and start caring for their own young.

The Ruby-throated hummingbirds are back, too. The males arrived about two weeks ago and then about a week later, the females showed up. Now we frequently see two males and two females at the feeders. Recently, one of my friends told me she had to rescue a hummingbird that got stuck in a screen on her porch. She offered her finger to the little bird and it put its feet right on it. It seemed to need a rest from its struggle. She had help pushing the beak through gently from the other side so that the bird could finally fly away. Although I don't wish this on any little hummingbird, I am a bit jealous of her close encounter with the delightful little creature.

We are also enjoying the spring gymnastics of the American goldfinches. The males have turned bright yellow and are in mating mode. They compete with each other in amazing feats that take a pair of them up, up into the sky. We always laugh when we see them.

A tiny baby painted turtle visited, too! We thought it needed a bit of help so we took it to the river and watched it swim away. Another day we came across an enormous American toad. What a week and that is not all.

Each evening at the river, Phil has seen a muskrat swimming along, sometimes carrying branches to the shore. We think he or she is building a new lodge. One night, Phil hit the jackpot. He looked up into the darkening sky and a Great Horned Owl had silently appeared on a branch right in front of him. I am jealous of that experience, too! I have to get out more, that is all there is to it.



This newly-hatched painted turtle was heading for the river so we offered it some help.

There was a lot of other activity, too, especially the pollinators. So many flowers, so little time, but I will leave that story for another column.

I hope you allow yourself some time to get outdoors or to observe from your window some of the nature shows we are enjoying in our own "Wild Backyard." And please consider certifying your own yard with the National Wildlife Federation. For more information see: www.nwf.org/In-Your-Backyard.aspx or see the Land Preservation Society (LPS) of Norton website: www.nortonlandpreservation.org/

Kathy Ebert-Zawasky is a member of LPS and Team Leader of the Wild Backyards of Norton program. Kathy can be reached by email: zawasky@comcast.net