

Spring Is Not Canceled

by Brett Amy Thelen, Science Director

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Wandering in search of woodcocks. photo © Brett Amy Thelen

I don't need to tell you that we are living in an extraordinary time. Every day, new closures or cancellations are announced, new cases of COVID-19 suspected or discovered. We are doing what we must to care for ourselves and our community, but the prospect of isolation or, worse, illness weighs heavy.

Like many of us, I prepared for the possibility of quarantine by stocking up on canned goods and coffee at the co-op last week. Pushing my grocery cart through crowded aisles and past empty shelves, I saw one weary, worried face after another. I got the sense that all of us, shoppers and cashiers alike, were just trying to hold it together – and barely succeeding.

The Unfurling of Spring

The other evening, desperate for a break from the anxiety and chaos and uncertainty, I went for a walk after work. The first half-hour, my mind was swirling with questions and to-do lists and contingency plans and niggling fears about whether I'd washed my hands often enough or long enough that day.

Then, I was drawn out of my dismal reverie by the peenting and twittering of two woodcocks, engaged in competing courtship displays. I'd never seen or heard woodcocks so close to my home before, and it stopped me in my tracks. Wild creatures, carrying on with their wild lives, oblivious to our human dramas. The slow, grand unfurling of spring.

My friend Sam Jaffe – educator, photographer, and chief caterpillar wrangler for The Caterpillar Lab in Marlborough – saw it too:

“As businesses close, the first red-winged blackbirds and eastern phoebes arrive to stake out nesting territories. As the CDC makes its recommendations, the red maple buds swell and the first spring caterpillars emerge to feed. As the toilet paper aisles sit empty at supermarkets, the great amphibian migrations continue.... We are just around the corner from the first tent caterpillars hatching, from dozens of species of moths at our lights, from viceroy butterfly caterpillars eating willow buds, from so much life. Many programs and events may have been canceled, but spring is not canceled.”

Every day, new birds are returning. On rainy nights, spotted salamanders and wood frogs are moving toward their breeding pools with great determination. In a few weeks, bloodroot and coltsfoot and trout lilies will appear. Fiddleheads will uncoil. With or without us, the natural world is reawakening.

It comforts me to know that, even though our own daily rhythms have been deeply disrupted, nature's rhythms endure.

Now, more than ever, we need time in nature – what poet Wendell Berry called “the peace of wild things.” “When despair for the world grows in me,” he wrote, “and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.... For a time, I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.”

Outside Is Open

Thankfully, being outside is perfectly in keeping with the principles of “social distancing,” as long as you venture out solo or with other members of your household and keep several feet away from anyone else you encounter on the trail.

So, sit in the garden and feel the warmth of the sun on your skin. Head to your nearest wetland after dark and immerse yourself in the deafening roar of love-struck peepers. Listen for owls. Search for spring wildflowers.

As ecologists and educators, we often talk of what people can do to sustain the natural world, but it's also important to remember how the natural world sustains us. It calms us, centers us, grounds us. It provides essential respite from the frenzied fusillade that is the 24-hour news cycle.

We are exceptionally fortunate to live in a place with a strong commitment to land protection and to ensuring that the public has access to this open space. Now is the perfect time to discover it all. You could hike a different Monadnock Region trail every day until the need for self-isolation has passed, and not repeat yourself once. Like many organizations, the Harris Center is canceling programs and events for a while, but our trails and grounds remain open, and we hope you'll use them.

Friends, if you can get outside during the days and weeks to come – whether to a Harris Center trail, one of the many other wonderful conservation lands in our neck of the woods, or even just your own backyard – do it. It helps. 🐾



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