

Nature Calendar

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Birds, bears and other beasts, underwater creatures large and small and vivid displays of flowers, berries and foliage all call Whatcom County home. We've compiled a calendar to help you keep on the lookout for what nature has to offer throughout 2012.



JANUARY

- ◆ Mountain goats and elk move to lower elevations. A good spot to see mountain goats is the cliffs along Baker River Trail.
- ◆ Fairy shrimp and finger-nail clams are hatched out and active in small, isolated wetland pools.
- ◆ Snow becomes heavy in the mountains. It's a good time to find animal tracks, including elk, snowshoe hare, cougar and bobcat.
- ◆ Truffles are abundant in the woods. These fungi stay below the surface, releasing fragrances that entice animals to eat them, passing on the spores.
- ◆ Mid-month, snow geese from the Fraser River delta fly over Whatcom County to the Skagit River delta, making for tens of thousands of snow geese in the Skagit delta.
- ◆ Great horned owls start their deep, hooting calls for mates.
- ◆ Breeding bald eagles begin nesting. They either build a structure out of sticks or add sticks to an old one.
- ◆ Coho run in Thompson and Boyd creeks.
- ◆ Witch hazel blooms.
- ◆ Late in the month seawater is at its clearest, with less plankton than at any other time of year.

FEBRUARY

- ◆ Barred owls start their mating calls.
- ◆ Late in the month, bull kelp anchors to the sea floor as deep as 30 feet down and begins growing.
- ◆ Alder catkins release pollen, making life miserable for allergy sufferers.
- ◆ Indian plum blooms.
- ◆ Tree swallows, among the first birds to migrate north for the summer, arrive.
- ◆ On any night after heavy rain with temperatures colder than 50, you will see adult salamanders and frogs migrating toward breeding grounds.
- ◆ Thousands of snow geese fly from the Skagit delta to the Fraser delta.
- ◆ Tree frogs start their chorus.
- ◆ Late this month, skunk cabbage produces heat and forces its way through snow and frost in swampy places.
- ◆ Bald eagles lay eggs in the last days of February and the first days of March.

MARCH

- ◆ The fragrance of budding black cottonwood fills the air with a sweet balsam scent.
- ◆ If you walk near a pond early in the month, you might hear a low murmur. That's male red-legged frogs calling beneath the water for mates.
- ◆ Red-flowering currant blooms.
- ◆ Silver-spotted tiger moth caterpillars, which hatched in the fall and spent the winter in Douglas fir trees, begin to spread out.
- ◆ Crustaceans, fish, mollusks and other sea creatures release thousands of tiny larvae into the plankton through April.
- ◆ Ladybugs come out of hibernation.
- ◆ Brant that winter in Mexico stop at Padilla Bay in Skagit County.
- ◆ Great blue herons move to colonies.
- ◆ Mid-month violet-green swallows and rufous hummingbirds arrive.
- ◆ Amphibian egg masses appear in ponds.
- ◆ Trillium blooms.

APRIL

- ◆ Little brown myotis bats return from hibernacula, or their winter hibernation spots. There's a nursery colony of hundreds of moms and their young in buildings at Hovander Homestead Park in Ferndale. The bats can be seen during spring, summer and early fall as they fly out of their roosts at dusk to feed on insects.
- ◆ California darners, the first dragonflies of the season, emerge from lakes and ponds.
- ◆ Bald eagle eggs hatch. For two weeks, the parents take turns watching over the chicks. After that, the parents go on hunting expeditions, leaving the chicks alone in the nest.
- ◆ Great blue herons begin to nest. The male gathers sticks; the female weaves them into the nest. The female lays three to five eggs. Both parents help incubate them for about four weeks.
- ◆ Big-leaf maples bloom.
- ◆ Camas blooms in low-lying meadows.
- ◆ Spawning time for Cherry Point herring begins, attracting flocks of surf scoters.
- ◆ Gray whales migrate along the Washington coast on their way from Baja California to their summer feeding areas around the Bering Strait.
- ◆ April 20 is the average date for the last frost.
- ◆ River flows rise as snow starts melting in the mountains. If heavy rains fall on the melting snow, flooding can result.
- ◆ Snow geese leave by the end of the month.
- ◆ The year's bull kelp reaches the water's surface.
- ◆ In April and May, plankton is at its thickest in seawater.
- ◆ Morels appear and oyster mushrooms fruit on hardwoods now through May.

MAY

- ◆ Dunlin fly north.
- ◆ Wood ducks and mallards fledge.
- ◆ The first chicks hatch in great blue heron colonies.
- ◆ Western grebes leave for the interior.
- ◆ Local black-tailed deer start having fawns. If you see one alone, don't touch it. It likely isn't abandoned.
- ◆ Mid-month, the western tanager, a striking songbird with a red head and yellow body, arrives. It's particularly drawn to cherry trees.
- ◆ Pond lily blooms.
- ◆ Trumpeter and tundra swans leave for the north.
- ◆ Brant leave for their breeding grounds in the Arctic.
- ◆ Southern resident orcas arrive in this area.
- ◆ Steelhead and sea-run cutthroat trout run in Thompson and Boyd creeks through June.
- ◆ Salmonberries fruit.
- ◆ Cottonwoods begin to release their fluffy seeds.
- ◆ Stinging nettles bloom.
- ◆ Elk herds disperse at the end of the month. The cows each give birth to a single calf.
- ◆ Mountain goats begin to have kids at the end of the month.

JUNE

- ◆ High summer in the bird world: All of the summer birds have arrived from the tropics, and the winter migrants have left. This lasts at least until the end of the month, when western sandpipers stop on their way south.
- ◆ Late in the month, snow melts above the tree line.
- ◆ As the snow melts, glacier lilies bloom.
- ◆ The first mosquitoes appear.
- ◆ Indian pipe, spotted coralroot and other pale, parasitic plants emerge from woodland soil.
- ◆ Serviceberries, wild strawberries, thimbleberries and red huckleberries fruit.
- ◆ The Earth's position relative to the sun and moon brings extreme low tides, to the delight of beachcombers and the demise of sea creatures caught in the sun.
- ◆ Harbor seals give birth to their pups this month and July. If you see a pup alone on a beach, do not approach it. Its mother will most likely return for it.



JULY

- ◆ Butterflies congregate on Yellow Aster Butte and other lower Cascade peaks.
- ◆ Toadlets of western toad emerge from the water. Don't touch; they're fragile. Places to see them: Silver Lake on July 4 weekend, and Hannegan Pass, Yellow Aster Butte, Elbow Lake trails.
- ◆ Wildflowers abound in mountain meadows.
- ◆ Scenic Artist Point at the end of Mount Baker Highway opens to motorists after enough snow has finally melted. The 2.7-mile stretch of road above 5,000 feet is typically open only three months. The stretch did not open in 2011 because of heavy and late snow.
- ◆ The algae that causes red tide blooms in great numbers in some locations, causing buildups of deadly poisons in nearby shellfish. In some places, the problem persists into October and beyond.
- ◆ Peak time for dragonflies. Don't be surprised if they follow you around; they're territorial.
- ◆ Big-leaf maples form seeds.
- ◆ The first young learn to fly in great blue heron colonies. For the next few weeks they hang around the nest, where their parents feed them.
- ◆ Bald eagle chicks learn to fly. They remain dependent on their parents, who teach them to hunt over the next few weeks.
- ◆ Moon jellies and fried egg jellies appear in local waters. In some places, such as Eastsound on Orcas Island, they can form huge crowds.

AUGUST

- ◆ Rufous hummingbirds move from lowlands to meadows above the tree line.
- ◆ Paintbrush blooms in mountain meadows.
- ◆ Perseid meteor shower peaks during the pre-dawn hours of Aug. 12, during a thin crescent moon that only slightly obscures the "falling stars." To see the show, get away from city lights and look northeast.
- ◆ Mid-month, giant dampwood termites swarm and fly. Often wrongly called flying ants, the red insects are clumsy fliers.
- ◆ A dinner plate-sized jellyfish called lion's mane booms in population.
- ◆ The last young learn to fly in great blue heron colonies.
- ◆ Chinook salmon run in Boyd Creek through September.
- ◆ Male mallards go into "eclipse plumage." Their flashy gray bodies and iridescent-green heads are replaced by mottled brown and black bodies and lighter brown heads. The males are trying to look dowdy, so as not to attract the attention of predators.

SEPTEMBER

- ◆ Blueberries fruit in the mountains, bringing bears into the meadows.
- ◆ Sockeye salmon run in Canyon Creek.
- ◆ Mid-month western grebes arrive for the winter. Once here, they replace their old feathers with new ones all at once, a molting process that can take up to a month and render them flightless during that time. They instead swim around local waters, fishing.
- ◆ Orb-weaving spiders reach peak size and mate.
- ◆ Southern resident orcas leave at the end of the month.
- ◆ Subalpine daisy blooms, bringing to an end the flowering season in the meadows above the tree line.
- ◆ Rivers reach their lowest flows.
- ◆ Two weeks after the first thorough rain of the fall, mushrooms sprout, including chanterelles and boletes.
- ◆ Huge wracks of eelgrass and kelp wash up on beaches.

OCTOBER

- ◆ Early in the month, migrating birds of prey ride thermals near ridge tops.
- ◆ Douglas fir cones open, releasing seeds to the wind.
- ◆ When big-leaf maples lose their leaves, the mosses and licorice ferns on their branches start growing.
- ◆ Fall colors are at their most brilliant in the mountains.
- ◆ Rough-legged hawks arrive from the Arctic, along with a variety of hawks and owls that winter in the area.
- ◆ Bulk of dunlin arrive.
- ◆ Elk rut. This time of year, elk bulls often bugle.
- ◆ Snow geese arrive mid-month.
- ◆ Gray whales migrate south again.
- ◆ Chinook, coho and chum salmon begin running in Whatcom Creek and continue into December.
- ◆ Coho and chum begin running on Chuckanut Creek and continue into December.
- ◆ Coho runs can be seen on Thompson and Boyd creeks and continue into December.
- ◆ From October into April, black bears den and enter a modified form of hibernation known as torpor. Though drowsy, bears still can defend themselves and their cubs should a predator threaten.
- ◆ First major snow in the mountains by the end of the month.
- ◆ Brant arrive at Padilla Bay around Oct. 31.
- ◆ Little brown myotis bats leave for their hibernacula, or their winter homes where they'll hibernate for five to six months. Once there, they enter a state of torpor in which their metabolism slows drastically.

NOVEMBER

- ◆ First frost by Nov. 2.
- ◆ Trumpeter swans arrive.
- ◆ Mosses mate, their sperm swimming through rainwater. Their spore bodies will form over the winter.
- ◆ Every few years (including 2011), snowy owls fly south to winter here.
- ◆ Mid-month is the last flight of the autumn meadowhawk and the last dragonfly of the season.
- ◆ Varied thrushes appear in inhabited areas of the lowlands.
- ◆ Hedgehog and matsutake mushrooms fruit.
- ◆ Extreme high tides of winter are pushed higher still by November storms.
- ◆ Most slugs go into hibernation.
- ◆ Coho and chum begin running in the Nooksack River and Squalicum Creek, and continue into December.
- ◆ Chum begin running in Padden Creek and continue into December.
- ◆ Coho begin running in Fish Trap Creek and continue into December.

DECEMBER

- ◆ All overwintering birds have arrived.
- ◆ Bald eagles congregate along the banks of the Nooksack and Skagit rivers, eating the carcasses of chum salmon that have spawned. The eagles stay around, in diminishing numbers, until mid-February.
- ◆ With the cold weather at the end of the month comes the bright red fruiting body of Sarcoscypha coccinea, the scarlet cup fungus, which grows on fallen hardwood branches.
- ◆ The lowest winter low tides occur in the middle of the night, the best time to see unsuspecting sunflower stars and giant pink sea stars of all sizes.



The Bellingham Herald file photos

Sources: Shona Aitken, Glen Alexander, Herbert Brown, Roger Christophersen, Fred Daugert, Jim Edwards, Brady Green, Jennifer Hahn, Al Hanners, Heather Higgins-Aanes, Marie Hitchman, Vikki Jackson, Joe Meche, Todd Murray, Patricia Otto, Fred Rhoades, Holly Roger, Doug Stark, Sylvia Thorpe, Terry Wahl, Bert Webber, Sue Webber, The Whale Museum at Friday Harbor, "The Sibley Guide to Birds," by David Allen Sibley, "Mushrooms Demystified," by David Arora, "A Birder's Guide to Washington," by Hal Opperman with contributions from members of the Washington Ornithological Society, Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife, Washington Department of Transportation, Whatcom County Parks and Recreation, davesgarden.com, Doug Huddle.

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