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Eye on the Environment

First Signs of Spring –Spotted in the Swan Valley!

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Last Monday morning, I peered out into the coming dawn to see my vehicle frosted in snow once again, flakes falling horizontally and me wondering “will this winter ever end?” The first day of spring was here and I wanted winter to be over. Patience now, it takes time for the seasons to really shift and change. It’s been a long winter, way too long for many folks this year.

Early last fall, the Farmers’ Almanac (Winter Outlook Map for the United States) provided a much-awaited and long-range forecast that “Old Man Winter” would exhibit a “split personality” during this winter. In the western states, milder-than-normal temperatures were expected. However, in terms of precipitation, storm tracks were expected to predominate during this winter season, bringing snowier-than-normal conditions.

In Mike Heard’s Blog, “this winter was greatly influenced by a La Nina event... This La Nina event was a stronger event than the one in the 2008-2009 winter season. Moderate to strong La Nina episodes typically lock Montana into a colder and wetter winter weather pattern.”

Heard goes on, “Looking back at this winter season, the data shows that overall Montana endured one of the coldest winter seasons in many years.” No surprise to those of us who endured the mix of wintery weather this year!

Just as spring was fast approaching, we were treated to the super full moon on Wednesday, March 16th. This full moon of rare size and beauty rose in the east at sunset. Dr. Tony Phillips of Science@NASA explains, “It was a super ‘perigee’ moon – the biggest in almost 20 years.

Full moons vary in size because of the oval shape of the moon’s orbit. It is an ellipse with one side (perigee) about 50,000 km closer to Earth than the other (apogee)... Nearby perigee moons are about 14% bigger and 30% brighter than lesser moons that occur on the apogee side of the moon’s orbit.” The super full moon may have appeared like you could reach out and touch it, but it was still 356,577 km away.

The beginning of spring arrived at 11:23 PM on Sunday night, March 20th. Also known as the **vernal equinox** in the Northern Hemisphere, this point in time represents when the center of the Sun spends a roughly equal amount of time above and below the horizon at every location on Earth, night and day being of nearly the same length.

The term *equinox* is derived from Latin words *aequus* (equal) and *nox* (night); in reality the day is longer than the night at an equinox. An **equinox** occurs twice a year, when the tilt of the Earth’s axis is inclined neither away from nor towards the Sun, the center of the Sun being in the same planes as the Earth’s equator. This occurs around March 20/21 and again September 22/23 each year. **Vernal** is derived

from the Latin word *ver* meaning *spring*. This point in time in September is known as the autumnal equinox; a Latin derivative of the word *autumnus* meaning *autumn*.

At the equinoxes, the rate of change for the length of daylight and nighttime is the greatest. At the North Pole, the spring equinox marks the start of the transition from 24 hours of nighttime to 24 hours of daylight. High in the Arctic Circle, there's an additional 15 minutes more daylight around the time of the spring equinox, where near the Equator, the amount of daylight each day varies by just seconds. Watch for the increasing daylight time and celebrate the coming of spring!

The first signs of spring are starting to show up. Robins have arrived. The rich, melodious songs of varied thrushes have been heard! Some bears are out and beginning to roam. More deer carcasses are appearing along the highway as the deep snows are melting. Coyotes are pairing up. Canada geese are arriving, checking out areas for open water. Red-winged blackbirds are singing, establishing their territories. Evening grosbeaks and pine siskins abound. Eagles, both bald and golden, still haunt the highway corridor for any available food. Even a couple of bluebirds were sighted at Clearwater Junction.

So as spring brings warmer weather and longer days, be aware springtime babies will be arriving in a few months. Remember, young of all wildlife do much better being reared by their parents. Please resist the temptation to "help" any young animals seen alone. An adult is usually close by and watching or off foraging for food. If you come across a baby songbird that appears to be uninjured, please realize that he may be simply testing out his wings and hasn't

figured it all out just yet. The adults are probably close – ready to fly in to feed their young or encourage them to try again.

In Montana, a few wildlife rehabilitators will accept injured or orphaned young. They generally accept all species, including baby songbirds, as well as injured adults. However, they prefer to have the young raised by their own parents since these adults do a much better job meeting the needs of their offspring than we do!

While most baby birds won't be fledging for a few more months and fawns will remain in their mother's wombs until June, these early signs of spring are good reminders to let wild mothers take responsibility for their young.