

## Wildlife Phenology – A Great Family Activity

By Tim Loose, Upper Miss Refuge

You may not recognize the word, but I'm willing to bet that many of you are practicing phenologists! I'll guarantee your ancestors depended on phenology for their survival. So what is it?

Technically, phenology is the study of an organism's response to seasonal and climatic changes in the environment! In simple terms it is keeping track of the changes occurring in nature and how the plants and animals respond to these changes.

If you were out on the River this fall, you probably noticed the eagles working on rebuilding their nests, perhaps you even saw a new nest being built! This activity is in response to the eagle's preparation for the nesting season. Bald Eagles in Pool 9 will start their courtship flights as early as February, and it's not uncommon for them to lay their first egg by the end of February. If they were to wait until February to try and repair or rebuild their nest, they might have a hard time getting the materials to the nest site. The sticks they need would probably be frozen to the ground. So the eagles take advantage of the fall weather to touch-up or repair their nests.

If you think eagles get started early, they are relative slow pokes when compared to the great horned owls. Many of these owls are already sitting on eggs by early February and their owlets will start hatching in early March. If you've ever been around a great horned owl nest in the early spring, one of the first things you will notice is the smell. It seems that the great horned owls time their nesting to take advantage of the early movements of skunks and other hibernating mammals. It only takes one good size skunk to feed a family of owls!

Keeping track of these events can be a fun activity for an individual or a family. Here at the McGregor District Office we keep a clip board posted on the wall and it becomes a friendly rivalry to be the first to see a flock of horned larks migrating north; or to hear the black-capped chickadees or cardinals start their spring songs. Something fun and interesting is always happening in nature. As your skills develop you will begin to notice subtle changes, like the first snow fall or perhaps the first spring thunderstorm. I always watch for marsh marigolds blooming in the wetlands or roadside ditches.

Now is the perfect time to get started. Lots of families write down their sighting on a calendar and compare these notes from year to year. You might be surprised at the results. Keep in mind that this can be a year round activity. Some frog species don't begin calling until late June and night hawks which migrate all the way to South America may start their fall migration in early August.

It's also fun to share this information with others. If you see an interesting sight, don't be afraid to drop me an email ([tim\\_loose@fws.gov](mailto:tim_loose@fws.gov)) and let me know what you're seeing. I'd love to hear from you.