

Natural signs that show spring comes earlier

Scientists warn of danger to Britain's birds and fish as the ancient timetable of plant and animal life unravels

Robin McKie The Observer, Sunday 23 January 2011

Spring is sooner recognised by plants than by men, states the Chinese proverb – a point that has been backed by science. Researchers have found that the behaviour of plants and the animals that feed on them shows spring is arriving earlier every year. It also appears that this advance is accelerating, according to Dr Stephen Thackeray of the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, in Lancaster.



Black-headed gulls have been seen sooner than expected with the hooded plumage they gain in spring.
Photograph: Pixonnet.com/Alamy

"We have measured the date of the arrival of spring according to the behaviour of more than 700 species of British animals and plants – including life forms such as plankton on lakes – and we have found that, on average, spring arrived 11 days earlier in the middle of the past decade than it did in the middle of the 70s," he says. "And the rate of change is getting greater."

Some of the first signs of spring include the appearance of the yellow flowers of lesser celandines in woodlands. Similarly, oak trees come into leaf, black-headed gulls acquire distinctive chocolate-brown hoods, and rooks begin rebuilding their nests.

Thackeray adds that the speed of spring's arrival has been monitored over many years using the timing of the appearance of plants, flowers and plankton. "Each year, a sequence of natural events unfolds," he says. "Plant life becomes active, then herbivores that eat those plants, and finally the carnivores that eat the herbivores."

The crucial point is that the appearances of plant life, herbivores and carnivores once dovetailed. However, they are responding to spring's early arrival in different ways and at different rates, with the result that there is now a distinct danger that birds – which need to feed on particular species of insects – are hatching too late to do so. Similarly, juvenile fish that need to feed on water fleas may hatch too late, and could starve. "The timetable that controls the way spring unwinds is changing and we badly need to find out how that might affect Britain's wildlife," says Thackeray.

This is an enterprise in which the public can help, using tools on the website naturescalendar.org.uk, for example. According to a sighting registered there, a lesser celandine – which usually starts flowering in March – was spotted doing so on Friday last week.

Name _____ Date _____

Adapted from an article by Rob McKie, The Observer, Sunday 23 January 2011
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/jan/23/spring-early-plant-animal-behaviour>

Natural signs that show spring comes earlier

Use a dictionary to find the meaning of these words then use each one in a sentence of your own to show the meaning.

- accelerating
- hydrology
- acquire
- herbivore
- juvenile
- enterprise

The topic of the third paragraph is:

- a) plants and trees in the spring
- b) bird life in spring
- c) the first signs of spring
- d) woodland life

Which word could be used instead of monitored in paragraph 4?

- a) explained
- b) assisted
- c) recorded
- d) decided

Which word (or words) could be used instead of crucial in paragraph 5?

- a) most important
- b) critical
- c) worst
- d) sharp

What is the style of the text?

- a) informative
- b) humorous
- c) persuasive
- d) descriptive

Punctuation

Three apostrophes for belonging have been missed out of paragraphs 4 and 5. Can you put them in?

Name _____ Date _____



Adapted from an article by Rob McKie, The Observer, Sunday 23 January 2011

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/jan/23/spring-early-plant-animal-behaviour>

Natural signs that show spring comes earlier

Choose one of these topics to write about:

- Write two or three paragraphs about signs of spring you have noticed in your garden or in the countryside.
- Say why you think it is important to understand how the climate is changing.
- Describe your favourite spring plant or a bird or animal that can be seen in spring.

Natural signs that show spring comes earlier

Adapted from:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/jan/23/spring-early-plant-animal-behaviour>

Main curriculum references

- Rt/L2.1 – Trace and understand the main events of continuous descriptive, explanatory and persuasive texts.
- Rt/L2.2 – Identify the purpose of a text.
- Rw/L2.1 – Read and understand technical vocabulary.
- Rw/L2.2 – Use reference material to find the meaning of unfamiliar words.
- Wt/L2.3 – Present information and ideas in a logical sequence using paragraphs where appropriate.

This resource was created as exam practice for Level 2 students but students at Level 1 would also find the material accessible.

The subject matter is very topical and was useful for sparking off a group discussion about climate change and leading into planning for writing ideas and opinions. Students at Entry levels in the same class were also encouraged to contribute to the discussion.

Extension work could involve work on grammar and punctuation, vocabulary work and discussion of type and purpose of text.

Nick Jackson
Tutor Skills for Life
Norfolk Adult Education

ANSWERS

The topic of the third paragraph is:

the first signs of spring

Which word could be used instead of monitored in paragraph 4?

recorded

Which word (or words) could be used instead of crucial in paragraph 5?

most important

What is the style of the text?

informative

Punctuation

Three apostrophes for belonging have been missed out of paragraphs 4 and 5. Can you put them in? (spring's arrival ^{paragraph 4}; spring's early arrival, Britain's wildlife ^{paragraph 5})