Nature's Calendar

January

Any living thing that is native to the Methow Valley has evolved over time to survive the energy bottleneck of winter and the enormous change in the landscape imposed by snow. Plants survive by either going to seed (that would be the annuals, like blue-eyed Mary and thread-leaf phacelia) or going dormant. Animals must either leave (migrate), hibernate, or adapt to life in the frozen, snow-covered environment of winter. The deeper the snow gets, the harder life gets for deer, who sink through drifts and whose food is increasingly covered, and the easier it gets for snowshoe hares, because their huge hind feet allow them to "float" on the surface of the snow-pack. The deepening snow acts as a magic carpet for the hares, slowly lifting them up over the course of the winter into the middle of their winter food supply of conifer needles and broadleaf buds, which are often several feet off the ground. But by late January the magic carpet is out of fuel and begins to deflate (at least at lower elevations), as the first avian migrants to return to the Methow, red-wing blackbirds, "come to melt the ice with their song." (Thoreau).

February

Why do red-wing blackbirds return to the Methow so early? The males are inevitably back by mid-February (they returned on January 12th in 1997), with the females arriving about two weeks later. Red-wing blackbirds are semi-communal nesters in their wetland habitats, and the crowding makes competition for the best sites intense. These wetlands also provides a food source earlier in the spring than the surrounding shrub-steppe; insect hatches begin as soon there is open water on the ponds and lakes. Red-wing males are polygamous, some having two mates and raising broods in two separate nests, so optimum nesting habitat can double a male's reproductive success. When two males meet at a territory boundary, they both raise their beaks and display their shoulder epaulets, sometimes even vibrating them. After this display one bird flies away--presumably the one with less color in his shoulder patches. Note the similarity of this arrangement to military uniforms. By the end of February, Say's phoebes are back in the valley, and mountain and western bluebirds can be found on the open, south-facing slopes.

March

Small changes in the cycle of the seasons that were evident in February are magnified in March. Bird species returning to the Methow this month include the violet-green and tree swallows, western meadowlark, killdeer, and, at the end of the month, yellow-rumped warblers. Among the flowers, the sagebrush buttercup, bluebell, spring beauty, yellowbell, and vernal whitlow-grass will be in bloom somewhere in the valley, eagerly waiting to be discovered by a suitable pollinator. One of the first plants to "bloom" is the mountain alder, which is wind pollinated. If you locate one or more of these trees in February, you can have the pleasure of watching their catkins slowly elongate through the month of March, and then begin to cast their pollen to the wind. Several butterfly species can be found in March, especially those that overwinter as adults—the mourning cloak, Milbert's tortoiseshell, and the several anglewings. Yellow-bellied marmots get up extraordinarily early from their winter hibernation, in late February or March. There are reports circulating that in some areas in the west, snow is melting earlier in the year because of global warming, causing the ground to warm and the marmots to wake from hibernation so prematurely that there is little or nothing to eat.

March 21st

The term Vernal Equinox comes from Latin. *Vernalis* means "of spring," and *equinoxum* means "time of equal days and nights." The vernal equinox is one of two times each year when the day and night are of equal length, each twelve hours long. On these days the axis of the spinning earth is neither tilted towards nor away from the sun, but is perpendicular to it, with the equator in the same plane as the sun. There is a 4,000 year old megalithic site located in Salem, New Hampshire, where carbon dating has estimated the age of some charcoal remnants at 3,000 and 4,000 years ago. The site contains five standing stones and one fallen stone in a linear alignment, which point to both the sunrise and sunset at the spring and fall equinoxes. Humans like to have a sense that they know where they are in time and space, and vernal equinox is one of the more reassuring of the signposts in the endless cycle of the seasons.