

Reassurance

Maybe there's been a time when the natural world and outdoor recreation were more important to our collective psyche than they are right now. But I can't recall when.

We're all a bit jittery, as local and world events change from day to day or even by the hour. Nothing seems certain. The air hums with a nervous vibe.

Which is why I'm yearning, even more than usual, to get outside. I need to see that some things aren't being upended by the latest press conference, overseas bulletin, or Dow Jones update. I suspect you are, too.

Fortunately, it's May in Montana, with the entire summer ahead of us. Excuse me while I let out a sigh of relief.

How reassuring it will be to drive past rivers and see trout dappling the surface. To pass pickups parked along streamside pulloffs, license plates covered in mayflies and caddis.

Already, yellow warblers are announcing spring from the tops of streamside cottonwoods. In mature conifer forests, western tanagers are flitting from tree to tree. Atop fence posts, meadowlarks are welcoming the warming weather with their amplified anthems. Wildflowers are blooming everywhere.

Walleye are still shallow right now and will be for a few more weeks, before moving deeper as the water warms. That's how it has always been with walleye, and this summer will be no different.

Mountain biking trails have begun drying out, and soon riders will be whizzing through forests, looking down for rocks and up ahead for bears. Rivers are running high with spring runoff, making for dangerous (or exhilarating, depend-

ing on your skill level) whitewater rafting and kayaking. Peak baggers have their maps spread out on kitchen tables, planning which summits to tackle next.

State parks are preparing for the summer rush, with maintenance crews finishing a paint job here, a cleanup there, making everything shipshape for guests.

People are breaking out their camping gear, smelling wood smoke in sleeping bags pulled from storage. They're checking tents for holes, seeing if the pop-up camper still pops up, buying spare mantles for the propane lantern.

Turkey hunters are out in the woods at sunup, as they always are this time of year, listening for the gobbles of lovelorn toms.

A friend emails to say she's planning a four-day canoe trip along the Missouri's White Cliffs area. Another calls to say he drew a permit to float the Smith.

It's almost summer in Montana. I can hardly wait.

Earlier this spring I was walking the dog

after dark and heard hundreds of snow geese passing over Helena. Illuminated by the city lights, they appeared as ghostly squadrons overhead, making their way north to Freezeout Lake as they have for eons. I thought how fortunate we are, those of us who live in places like this, where we can regularly restore our faith that the natural world still marches on, even during these unsettling times. Where we can step outside and witness timeless rituals that continue whether we see them or not.

I find reassurance in nature's relentless reliability.

Several weeks ago, a red-winged blackbird's scratchy *conk-a-leeeee* signaled his springtime arrival at the pond outside my office window, just as he does every year.

Welcome back, I wanted to tell him. Thanks for always coming back. 🐾



ILLUSTRATION BY STAN FELLOWS

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