

Spring 2018

NATURE NOTES

at Magazine Beach Park

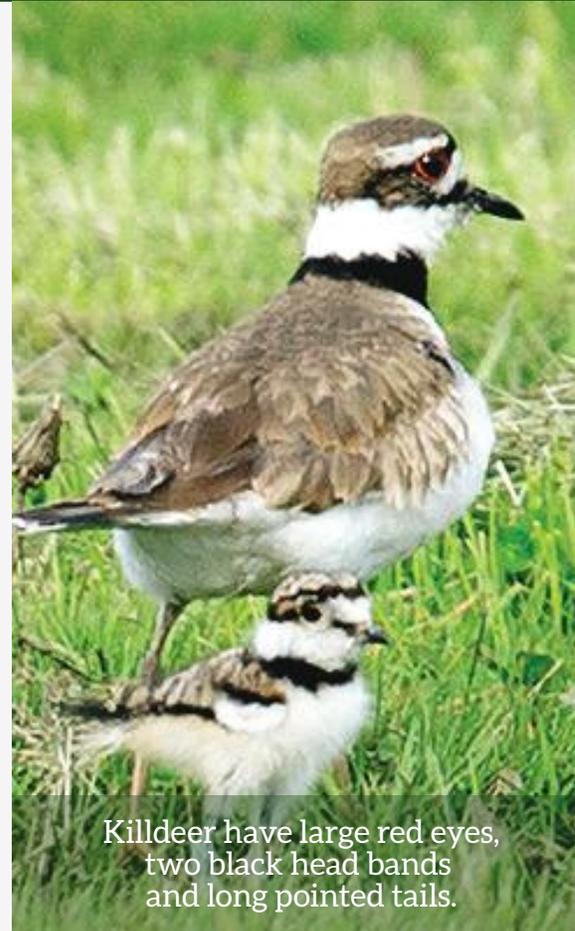
The third of 4 seasonal newsletters funded by the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation, Five Star & Urban Waters Program

EARLY BIRDS OF SPRING

Red-wing blackbirds—the first birds of spring—made their appearance at the park at the beginning of March. The next arrivals are shorebirds: killdeer, snipes and American woodcocks.

Look for the handsome killdeer running around the lawns in early spring. Its distinctive gait includes a few steps of running, followed by a stop to look around, then more running and another stop to look around. They are masters of the broken wing feint and will try to distract you away from their nest if you venture too close. Shallow depressions scratched into plain ground, their nests are disguised to hide in plain sight by incorporating sticks, rocks, bits of shell and even pieces of trash intended to get you and animal predators to pass by without noticing.

Once hatched, young killdeer leave the nest as soon as their feathers dry off. They can be seen near tall grasses, running with their parents and stopping to look for food. Normally, they migrate in to nest and leave soon after their young can fly.



Killdeer have large red eyes, two black head bands and long pointed tails.

SPRING PEEPER CHORUS

Some people mark spring by the arrival of the equinox, this year March 20th. Others look for the high-pitched call of spring peepers chorusing at dusk and throughout the night. The chorus is a mating ritual of these tiny frogs, who lay their eggs on the edges of wetlands and small pools of water.

Ranging from 1 to 1.5 inches long, they can be seen, if you are lucky, at dusk, emerging to feed on insects such as beetles, flies and spiders. Look for them in the wetland area next to the kayak launch, the west swale, and in the pools of water on the lawn.

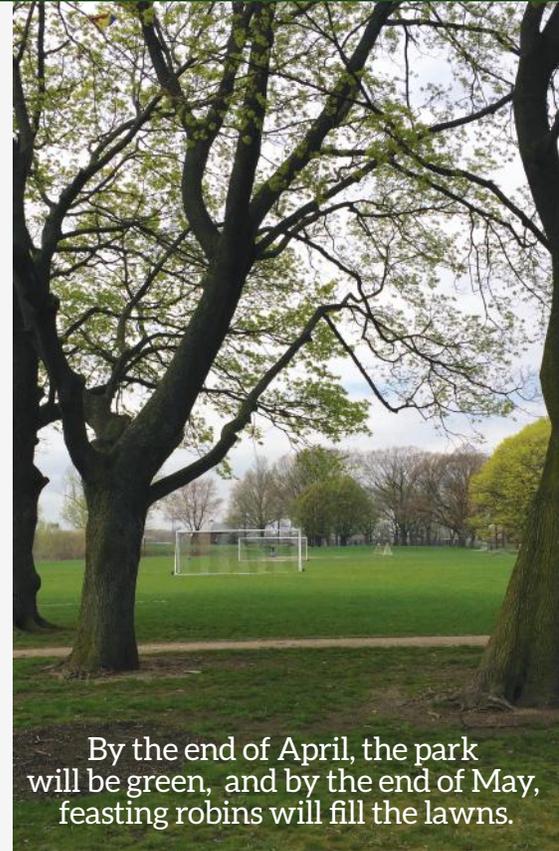


Listen for the peepers at dusk.

THE HUMBLE EARTH WORM

Each spring, the lawns fill with up to 300 robins pulling earth worms from the moist soil to feed themselves and their young, while aerating the lawns in the process. Earth worms burrow close to the surface by day, where they are protected from the sun, and come to the surface at night, hence the nickname night crawlers. When it's too cold or dry, they retreat into their burrows, curl into a ball and go dormant.

Earth worms contribute to the ecosystem by composting dead organic matter, such as leaves, and creating hummus. Worms also ingest particles of earth and very small stones into their "crop." In the crop these fine particles are ground into a fine paste that is digested in the stomach. It is then excreted in the form of worm casts, a finely balanced mixture of nutrients and minerals. Further, the very act of moving through the soil creates tunnels for air and water. Charles Darwin wrote: "It may be doubted whether there are any other animals that have played so important a part in the history of the world, as have these lowly creatures."

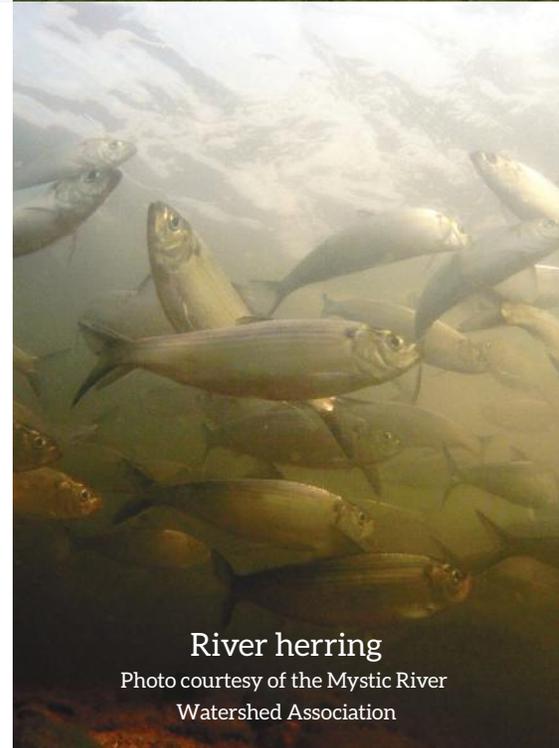


By the end of April, the park will be green, and by the end of May, feasting robins will fill the lawns.

HERRING ARE RUNNING

Look for jumping fish in the river from the middle of March through mid-June. Fishermen tell me the fish they catch at Magazine Beach include herring, striped bass, perch and carp. The herring run features two species: Alewife and Blueback. Although born in fresh water, herring spend most of their lives in the ocean, returning to fresh water in maturity to spawn.

The Alewife run is first, getting started in the middle of March and lasting until the end of May, the time period when the water temperature is ideal for their spawn: 51 degrees F. Blueback prefer warmer water (58 degrees F.) and run from mid-May through mid-June. Both species swim upstream to Watertown, where they leap up a ladder to get over the dam, which blocks their way to the rocky areas where they lay their eggs every year. Look for cormorants, who hunt them, nearby.



River herring

Photo courtesy of the Mystic River Watershed Association

Magazine Beach Partners, a newly created 501c3, is dedicated to working with the Massachusetts Department of Conservation & Recreation (DCR) and the City of Cambridge to revitalize Magazine Beach Park—the City's second largest park. We support the preservation of this wonderful green open space. To learn more, go to: magazinebeach.org.