

Even though morning temperatures have still been in the single digits much of the time, there are signs that spring will soon be here. We are beginning to see the subtle signals Mother Nature is sending our way.

The surest indication--unaffected by the fluctuations of the weather--is, of course, that we are the recipients of a few more minutes of daylight every day. Since the equinox a couple of days ago, our nights are now shorter than our days. We watch through our east window--on clear mornings--to see the sun come up a little farther north each day.

Maple syrup season is here, too. So, when there are freezing temperatures during the night and thermometers reading in the forties during the daytime, we can look for a sap run. As one family member noted today, the near-syrup boiling sap smells like "bacon, eggs, and pancakes."

We are beginning to see the return of our summer birds, too, though many are still on their way north. The local Canada geese are back, a few ducks have been in the marshes, and the sandhill cranes have arrived. There is something primitive and enduring about the call of the cranes, and we look forward each year to their return to nest in the willow swamp on the farm.

Some of the small song birds are also here again. Red-winged blackbirds are back. They are one of the most interesting birds, I think. They are very territorial, and each male--according to Stokes Field Guide to Birds--holds about an eighth to a quarter of an acre which he defends by singing from a perch with wings extended and red wing patches exposed. Some of them are also aggressive enough to fly very closely over my head if I am running on the road that crosses their territory.

We have not seen a bluebird yet, but we hope that a pair will nest in one of the boxes on the fence. They have to contend with the tree swallows that also will come a little later. We depend on the swallows for a lot of insect control.

The most interesting animal that has shown up in recent weeks, though, is a little muskrat. He appeared in the hay barn during the extremely cold weather a month ago. We don't know where he came

from, but we have plenty of marshy ground and willow swamps, so it could have been from any direction. Why he came we don't know. I have seen him several times, even in the barn with the cattle. There is a small entrance building attached to the barn on the west side, and I saw him run into it one day. There is a little opening at the bottom of the door that was big enough for the muskrat. However, the doors from that building to the barn are tight. I wondered what he would do. I expected he would wait until I was nowhere to be seen and then go back out the way he came in.

The next morning, though, there was a little hole chewed through the door to the barn, and he had apparently moved into the warmer confines of the cow barn. He had made a nice little door just his size. I told Runo, "That muskrat wants to be a beaver when he grows up!"

The sometimes abrupt, often stop-and-go, always unpredictable change of seasons is one aspect of our area of Michigan that is appealing. As we look ahead to "real" spring, we may experience winter weather instead, and, on occasion, a hot, almost summery day that makes me wish for fall and winter again.