

Expected Times of Arrival

If the arrival of warm weather is the most positive sign, spring comes to different Canadian places at remarkably different times.

Bruce Hutchison once wrote an essay entitled "Canadian Spring" in which he advanced the theory that it first arrived on the tip of Vancouver Island in late February or early March, "wearing violets and daffodils and primroses in his hat" and then moved slowly eastward, across the mountains to the prairies and finally to Ontario, Quebec and the Atlantic Provinces.

"By the time [spring] has reached the Great Lakes," he wrote, "the first green stalks of grain will be thrusting through the winter crust far behind him and in Winnipeg the early crops of tin cans and ash heaps will be leaping up suddenly through the snow."

It is an amusing picture, but the facts of the case are less orderly and more complicated. The mean January temperature on British Columbia's southern coast is 40°F, and one could say that spring spends the entire winter there. It is true that warm weather comes sooner to the southern prairies than to the east coast, but Mr. Hutchison blinked his eye at everything north of the 49th parallel. If a mean of 40° is a fair measure of minimum spring balminess, the season doesn't get to the southern Arctic until July and it never gets to the northern Arctic.

If one measures the advance of spring by the melting of the ice and snow, there are also opportunities for confusion. Some sections have a lot more to melt than others. The Northwest Territories, which is basically frozen desert, is likely to receive no more than forty inches of snow in a year — the equivalent of less than five inches of rain. On Vancouver Island there will probably be about twenty inches, while the upper coast of British Columbia gets eighty or so. There is a lot more snow in the east than on the prairies; in most of Ontario and Quebec the annual mean is eighty inches and in places it is one hundred.

There are, of course, other ways to measure spring's arrival than with thermometers and overflowing creeks, and the best may be the behaviour of the flowers, birds, beasts and people.

Across the country Canadians mark the real end of winter by opening up their summer lake cottages, traditionally on May 24th, Victoria Day, but there have been many hopeful signs before that.

In the Rocky Mountains spring comes with a rush of water. Much of the mountain snow stays frozen year round, but a lot melts, turning narrow creeks into boiling rivers of floating timber and rolling boulders. Once, in the 1960s, fifteen inches of rain fell on southeast British Columbia and southwest Alberta in a single spring downpour, and that, added to the melting snows, washed out roads and flooded townships.

In Edmonton the snow melts in March or April, and the schoolchildren put on the rubber boots they will wear until May, discard their winter clothing and go out in the school yard to shoot marbles and jump rope.

The most obvious sign of spring's arrival in Edmonton and the rest of the North is the swift lengthening of the day. The winter sun sets at 4 p.m., but by May it shines until 10 o'clock at night. Summer heat comes soon, and in Alberta the springs, like the autumns, are short.

Spring comes to Nova Scotia's northern coasts in the form of icebergs. When the drift ice comes down in April, the air in Cape Breton smells, in Hugh MacLennan's phrase, like an icebox that needs defrosting. The floes, spongy and greenish, crowd right into the harbours.

Spring comes everywhere in the shape of flowers. They usually arrive across the province (with the exception of British Columbia) in April. Many of the same ones — poppy, columbine, daylily, spring adonis — thrive from coast to coast.

By June even the Yukon has begun to thaw and Frances Lake is brilliant blue, the Dog Tooth Mountains are dark with spruce, pine and fir, the black bears, brown bears and grizzlies are prowling about and the valleys and river basins are green with moss.



Pink Lady's Slipper.