



Urban Wildlife Issues
Wildlife Rescue column by Nicky Fried
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Did you know that the original Roman calendar was lunar and had only ten months, beginning with March? The period from mid-winter to spring, when nature apparently sleeps, was considered a dark time and not even counted as part of the calendar. January and February were only added to the original lunar calendar in 700 BC.

I think I prefer the old ways. January and February should be official hibernation times. Of course the fact that here in the Lower Mainland we are all drowning in water, doesn't help much. (I no longer bother with the garden path because I need a small boat to navigate it.)

It's hard to imagine spring in all this wetness, but nature's eternal circle is always turning, and the first signs of spring are already here.

Groundhog Day was February 2nd, supposedly the day that the Groundhog comes out of its hole after a long winter sleep to look for his or her shadow. If he sees it, he regards it as an omen of six more weeks of bad weather and returns to his hole. Groundhog Day organizers maintain that the rodents' forecasts are accurate 75 to 90 percent of the time.

Animals are well attuned to the rhythms of the natural world. They don't march to a day of the month or a clock, but rather to the realities of temperature, hours of sunshine and availability of food. When a Groundhog doesn't see its own shadow, it's very likely the weather is warmer than usual and the little fellow feels like exploring.

Hibernation and winter sleeping are good examples of how animals will adapt to a climate, rather than sticking to a pre-determined schedule. Bears, although not true hibernators, will undergo a period of winter sleep from which they may wake several times during the winter. The Grizzly Bears on top of Grouse Mountain will sleep for two and a half to three months, while their cousins further north in colder climates will sleep for five to six months. For animals in very cold climates hibernation or sleeping is a crucial adaptive strategy helping them survive long cold winters when food is scarce. The Grouse Grizzlies should begin to emerge from their deep sleep early in March.

Other animals like Raccoons and Skunks also sleep or "den-up" for long periods in the winter. They wake to eat, sometimes on stored food, and they experience only slight changes in body functions. In the Lower Mainland these critters tend to stay active

because of the warmer weather. Once you begin to see more of these mammals you know that spring is just around the corner.

One mammal you probably are seeing more of already is the Gray Squirrel. These early harbingers of spring are chasing one another as they search for a mate. Squirrels are pretty good at the mating thing. The entire Gray Squirrel population here in the Lower Mainland was started when six or eight squirrels of mixed morphology, black and gray, were introduced to Stanley Park in 1909.

The mating period for the Gray Squirrel is three weeks. Courtship begins when a receptive female begins to call continuously from a treetop with characteristic duck-like calls. Several males gather and they might fight to determine the dominant animal. The agitated female will race through the trees followed closely by all the males. When she is ready she will stop and allow the dominant male to mate with her. Gestation is 40 to 44 days and an average of three young are born, although the litter size may range from one to six. Squirrels will mate again in June, July.

Young Gray Squirrels are among the first “baby” patients that we see at the Wildlife Rescue Association of BC (WRA), followed by Chickadees, House Sparrows and Mallard ducklings.

If you are an early riser, like me, you may have heard increased bird song. The Chickadees and House Sparrows respond to the lengthening days by changing from generic chirps to species mating songs. Robins will soon be a feature on urban lawns and they too will be among the earlier birds to breed.

Here at the WRA it's a race to get our current patients healthy and back in the natural world, ready for the breeding season.

I may not enjoy the gray days of January and February but they're a vital part of the very comforting and eternal circle of nature.