

Wildlife watch

Can you see colours breaking out from the ground as spring approaches?

Although it's still winter, some signs of spring are starting to take hold. New colours are peeking out from the foliage and many of the animals that slept away the cold months are beginning to wake up.

The sights, smells and sounds of the countryside are slowly returning. The quiet buzz of insect wings filters through the air and the morning birdsong gets louder every day. The weather is notoriously unpredictable at this time of year but we are beginning to see brighter days and some of the animals that were holed up inside over the winter are now venturing outdoors.

For thousands of years, house mice have made their homes in human settlements, thriving wherever there were people. Now there are more than five million house mice in the UK, occupying our farms, houses, sheds and outbuildings. After spending the winter tucked up in people's homes, gobbling their food to survive, house mice are now heading outside. Look out for them as the Sun sets, scuttling around bird feeders or sniffing about wherever animal feed is stored. However, don't be surprised if they don't go far – a well-fed mouse might have a home range no bigger than a king-sized bed.

TUNNEL HOMES
House mice construct a system of tunnels to live in, which can have many rooms.



A house mouse.

Basking lizards



Common lizards are just waking up from their winter hibernation. Look out for them basking in sunlight in woodlands or on dry paths. You may notice some lizards have peeling patches of dry skin. These are males, shedding their skin before the mating season begins. This will ensure their colours are at their most vibrant when they attempt to attract females.

JELLY EGGS

The jelly-like eggs of amphibians are starting to appear in ponds and lakes this month but what animal made them? Frogspawn is laid in clumps, whereas toads lay their eggs in strings.



A frog with its frogspawn.

Queen wasps



Early spring is the perfect time to see queen wasps. These huge and dazzling insects are usually hidden away in their nests but at this time of year, after their winter hibernation, you may spot them starting to build new nests in hollow trees or buildings. Queens then lay eggs that hatch into female workers. The workers take over nest building and food collection.

CELANDINE DAY

Bright and beautiful celandines bloom so reliably in early spring that 21 February is known as "Celandine Day". Their star-shaped flowers can be seen in woodlands and hedgerows.



Celandine flowers.

The great tit



A great tit.

Spring is just around the corner but the largest of our native tits, the great tit, is already seeking out the best nesting spots. Look out for their green and yellow feathers and listen to their distinctive two-syllable song. If you want to attract great tits to your garden, why not try putting up a nest box? They like small, raised boxes with round entrance holes. However, they can be quite aggressive at a bird table, fighting off smaller tits.

Lambing

We often associate lambs with Easter but the UK lambing season actually begins as early as December. Most farmers choose to start their lambing at the start of spring, when the weather is milder. For some ewes (female sheep), lambing is simple and they manage to give birth out in the field without any help from the farmer. Other ewes find it a little trickier, especially first-time mums. For this reason, some farmers bring their ewes into the lambing shed when it's time for them to give birth. They are often watched around the clock because lambs can arrive at any time.

LOTS OF LAMBS

Soon waggy-tailed lambs will be seen in fields up and down the country. Some ewes can rear three lambs at once.



A lamb with its mother.

Plant a shrub



Shrubs are woody plants that provide habitats for birds, insects and mammals. They also give shade, look great in the garden and last for many years. Now is the perfect time to plant them, before it gets too hot. Choose a native species with nectar-rich flowers to support plenty of wildlife. Water your shrub lots before and after planting.