

Lengthening Days by Rebecca Lexa

Many of us enjoy the longer days as the sun travels northward in the spring sky. Increased sunlight is good for us, providing us with much-needed vitamin D, and often a boost in our mood as well! But it signals changes for many other species as well.

One of the best-known examples is migration. Birds and other animals travel to and from this area throughout the year. In winter it's an important place for them to find food during harsh weather and to avoid colder temperatures further north, and in summer it's a great location to raise young. Overwintering birds know it's time to leave as the increase in daylight triggers hormones that tell them migration is nigh. They're replaced by more migrants who arrive here after similar internal signals.

Longer days also provoke physical changes in birds and other animals. Some species only grow their special mating plumage after the day length reaches a certain point. They also sing territorial or perform other mating displays once the day is long enough.

It's not just animals that are affected by the longer days, though. Plants that have lain dormant all winter are producing new growth. Deciduous trees grow leaves to replace those shed last fall, while conifers show paler green needles growing at the ends of their branches. Flowering plants begin to bring forth their lovely colors and provide nectar and pollen for their pollinators. Some plants, known as long-day plants, wait until the day is a particular length before producing flowers. Others, called short-day plants, don't flower until after the summer solstice when the days begin to shorten again.