

Webster defines harbinger as “a person or thing that comes before to announce or give indication of what follows.” In last week’s column I referenced a number of harbingers. All indicated the arrival of spring.

For those of us living in Central Nebraska, one of the most obvious harbingers announcing that spring will soon arrive is the Sandhill crane. Thousands of them are now filtering into the Platte Valley. Although I am always amazed and excited to witness these magnificent forerunners of spring, another smaller feathered harbinger that I highly favor deserves attention. I’m referring to *Turdus migratorius*, better known as the American robin.

I’m reasonably sure that most people will agree the robin is America’s favorite songbird. Claimed to be one of the most widely recognized birds in North America, even little children are familiar with the robin’s discernable red-orange breast and cheerful song. Although being classified as a migratory bird, occasionally robins are known to stay the winter in many areas. However, rarely, if ever, have I seen robins in our yard through the winter months. Where they migrate for the winter is beyond me, but I’m always thrilled when they return, and I spot my first robin. For me, robins are the true harbingers of spring.

Hanging above our fireplace is a painting of a robin. The scene is late winter/early spring. Snow is on the ground and the scene includes a number of large maple trees, each with a sap bucket attached. Sitting in the forefront of the picture, atop a covered sap bucket, is one lone robin. One of my favorite pictures, this truly depicts a harbinger of spring.



But there is more. Now that robins have returned, warmer weather will certainly follow. I look forward to the day when Rita and I can once again return early in the morning to our deck. There, we will visit and enjoy our first cup of coffee for the day while listening to the robin's rich caroling, often heard just before the first light of day.

I also excitedly await the day when we will once again see robins foraging in our yard. So interesting is their method. When foraging, a robin often runs a few steps, then stops abruptly. With its head cocked to one side, it searches for earthworms by staring motionless at the ground. It's somewhat humorous and entertaining to watch a robin attempt to pull a worm from the soil, particularly if the worm is putting up a strong resistance.

Following mating, it's fascinating to watch the female robin build her nest, usually in the lower branches of a tree and sometimes in other odd places. A few years ago, Rita and I enjoyed watching a robin build her nest atop one of the support posts on our deck. Interestingly, she builds the nest from the inside out. First, she presses dead grass and twigs into a cup shape, about six inches across and six inches high. Once formed, she reinforces the nest with mud. She then lines the nest with fine dry grass. Shortly thereafter, she lays her beautiful blue eggs, usually numbering four.



Again, it becomes mom's job to incubate the eggs which typically takes twelve to fourteen days. Once the eggs hatch, it becomes a full time job for both parents to protect and feed the clamoring babies during the ten to sixteen days they spend in the nest.

The robins have arrived. Not only are they true harbingers, foretelling what is to come, but they themselves are fascinating creatures to study and enjoy.