

LOCAL&STATE

Erratic winter weather confuses local wildlife



Backyard and Beyond
Todd McLeish
Columnist

It happened again. We had another crazy winter that alternated between heavy snowfall, record-breaking warmth, and icy cold temperatures, which is once again causing us to question how we define winter weather in New England.

It's seeming like we'll never again have those long stretches of sub-freezing temperatures that allow our ponds and lakes to freeze solid and give everyone the opportunity to lace up their ice skates and slide across the ice. When I was a kid, everyone knew how to skate because pond skating was so readily available in just about every neighborhood. But now, fewer people skate because it's so inconvenient to learn and practice. Our ponds seldom freeze thick enough anymore to withstand the weight of a neighborhood full of skaters.

Our increasingly erratic winter temperatures have not just made pond skating in Rhode Island a thing of the past. It's also confounding the natural world.

I saw numerous reports of crocuses blooming in mid-February when the temperatures hit the 60s for several days in a row. Trees and shrubs in several places started to bud as well. And then they all had to go dormant again when the cold temperatures returned.

Early-blooming spring flowers and shrubs are used to the variability of the New England weather, though, so they aren't likely to be harmed by their efforts to make an appearance weeks before they should. But the energy they wasted trying to grow and bloom in February may mean they don't have the energy to try again at a more appropriate time. And as a result, our usual springtime colors may not be as bright or abundant this year. And that seems to be happening more and more often.

It's not just the vegetation that's getting an early workout from the unusual swings in winter temperatures, however. Some animals are likely struggling, too.



A spotted salamander. PROVIDED

Wood frogs have the remarkable ability to freeze nearly solid during the winter and then thaw themselves out as spring approaches. They're the earliest active amphibian in our area, typically arriving in local ponds in mid to late March to breed. To me, they're the surest sign of spring we have left.

But when spring-like temperatures arrive for a few days in February, the frogs are triggered to thaw themselves out. And when they realize they've jumped the gun, they have to refreeze. The more often they do that, the less likely they will emerge unscathed once winter is truly over. And these days they find themselves thawing

and refreezing several times each year, which wreaks havoc with their physiology.

The situation is similar for two other local amphibians that migrate to local breeding ponds in late March – spring peepers and spotted salamanders. I swear I heard a peeper calling in February, which doesn't bode well for the little guy. They're struggling to detect when the time is right to emerge from their winter hibernation. As are woodchucks and skunks, chipmunks and garter snakes, and a whole host of other creatures.

And let's not forget the migratory birds, many of which must make an

educated guess about the weather hundreds or thousands of miles away to decide when to begin their long flights. And if they arrive too early or too late for the emergence of their preferred insect food, then their breeding season may be a bust.

Hopefully, most of these creatures will figure out our new normal for winter and spring weather before it's too late. I just wish the same could be true of pond skating.

Naturalist Todd McLeish has been writing about wildlife and the environment for more than 25 years. His latest book is "Narwhals: Arctic Whales in a Melting World."

Museum of Newport Irish History: Lecture to discuss Newport's first Irish mayor

From Staff Reports

Newport Daily News
USA TODAY NETWORK

NEWPORT — The Museum of Newport Irish History will hold the fifth talk in its 20th annual Michael F. Crowley Lecture Series on Wednesday, March 23, at 6 p.m.

The event is being held virtually on Zoom and in person at the Wayfinder Hotel.

Guest speaker Steve Marino, a local historian and tour guide, will present a lecture titled "The Life and Times of Patrick J. Boyle, Newport's first Irish Mayor." The lecture is made possible by a gift from BankNewport. A question-and-answer session will follow.

When Patrick Boyle became mayor in 1895, few could imagine it was the start of a political career in Newport that spanned over 20 years. Marino will explore how this son of Irish Catholic immigrants, a Democrat in a solidly Republican town, managed this political feat. Guests will hear about Gilded Age in Newport through the Irish eyes of Patrick J. Boyle, who died in his 17th term in office in January 1923.

There is no fee to participate in the lecture via Zoom, but reservations are required to receive the Zoom login information. For more information and to reserve, please visit the "Lectures" page at newportirishhistory.org.

Seats are limited for the in-person presentation and reception with light



Former Newport Mayor Patrick J. Boyle. PROVIDED BY MUSEUM OF NEWPORT IRISH HISTORY

hors d'oeuvres and cash bar to follow at the Wayfinder Hotel, 151 Admiral Kalbfus Road in Newport.

Non-members of the Museum of Newport Irish History wishing to attend in person should write to newportirishhistory@gmail.com and include your phone number and number in your party. You can also phone Ann at 401-841-5493 for assistance. In-person guests must be fully vaccinated.

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Will the state see another COVID spike this spring?

Patrick Anderson

Providence Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

The number of new COVID-19 infections in Rhode Island has stopped falling, and the explosion of cases in Asia is a reminder that the virus is still out there.

New waves of infections have tended to arrive every few months, and last year's massive winter surge was followed by a much more modest uptick in April.

So with the state mask order gone and Gov. Dan McKee's emergency powers set to expire, could another mini resurgence be in store this spring?

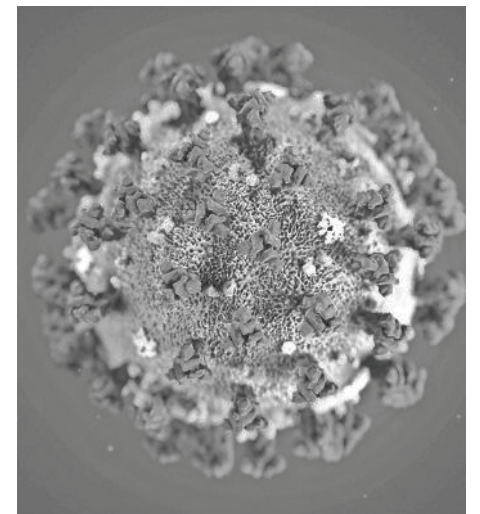
State health officials on Friday acknowledged that it's possible but said they aren't too worried we'll see a new surge resulting in major health impacts.

"...barring any additional variants or unforeseen changes to conditions, our models are suggesting that we are likely entering a period in which case and hospitalization counts will fluctuate in a relatively tight range for several months," Health Department spokesman Joseph Wendelken wrote when asked what latest computer projections show.

"It is possible we could see a moderate uptick in the short term — we are currently seeing modest increases in non-COVID respiratory infections," he added. "However, current models suggest that any COVID increases in the short term are not likely to be very sizable or sustained."

Wendelken cautioned that the models' forecasts can change rapidly based on changing conditions, especially new variants and travel patterns.

The seven-day average of new Rhode Island coronavirus cases rose five consecutive days last week. On Friday it was 180 cases, up 24% from the previous Friday. That's still a fraction of peak omicron volume in early January,



An illustration of the novel coronavirus. CDC VIA AP

when the state was averaging 5,349 new cases a day.

Measurements of the viral load in wastewater, which have been a reliable leading indicator of COVID surges throughout the pandemic, are showing small increases in some parts of New England after falling off steeply since January.

Hospitalizations, which usually lag new cases, were still falling in Rhode Island last week. As of Wednesday, there were 64 COVID-positive patients in Rhode Island hospitals, the fewest since Aug. 4.

McKee earlier this week extended the state's COVID state of emergency until April 13.

But his authority to issue new emergency executive orders, such as the recently revoked mask mandate or measures that suspend state laws, will end before that, on March 31.

The official state of emergency allows the state to qualify for additional federal aid.

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