

Pussy willows — that's a sure sign of spring

Spring — rejuvenation. It is always enjoyable to walk nature trails in spring and watch life emerge on a daily basis. One day there are no flowers or butterflies, and the next day, miraculously, they are there.

Those who choose to walk trails near flooded, open areas find delight in the appearance of "pussies" on willow trees. They are certainly a harbinger of spring for many people.

But most people do not return to walk the same trail to see the continuing resurgence of life and the transformations that occur.

PUSSY WILLOWS are one of the first willows that begin to flower. All winter, a single encapsulating scale covered the developing flower bud protecting it from the elements.

As temperatures rise and daylight hours lengthen, the scale splits to ex-

pose the "furry" immature flower bud. If you return in a week or so, you will no longer see a soft fluffy bud, but instead a beautiful bottle-brush flower with golden tips of long awaited pollen.

Willow flowers are one of the first sources of pollen for bees that have emerged from their winter dormancy. These male flowers produce copious amounts of pollen so that some will glide on the wind to the less-

suspicious female flowers.

PUSSY WILLOWS also attract the furry yellow and black bumblebees. Those seen early in spring on the delicate firework flowers are the large queens that survived the winter. They are much larger than the workers seen during the summer.

The queen must feed on the willow pollen in order to begin laying eggs for a new colony she will start in an

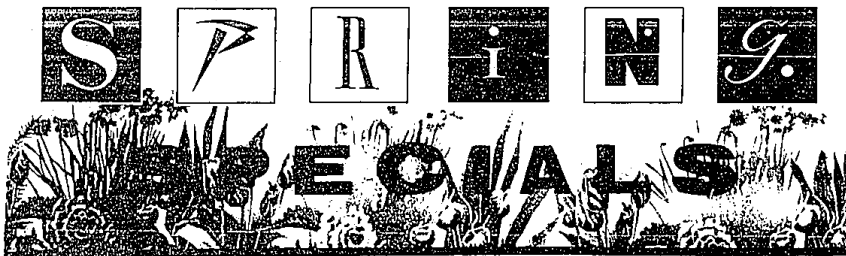


nature
Timothy Nowicki

underground hive. Wetlands are perfect for the pussy willow and red osier dogwood, but

not all plants can survive such wet conditions. Nor is the willow tree the only plant that produces a furry bud. Immature poplar buds also have a furry appearance and should not be mistaken for a pussy willow. Though willows and poplar both have furry buds, differences in their bark will help you separate between the two.

The writer is staff naturalist for Independence Oaks Count Park.



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