

An illustration of a spring scene in Northern Ireland. A brown rabbit is on the right, surrounded by purple bellflowers and white snowdrops. A bee is flying near the top left. The background is a mix of green grass and a purple sky.

Spring in Northern Ireland

Calendar Clashes

Meteorology is a science concerned with atmosphere and the weather. If we follow the meteorological calendar then the months of spring are March, April and May.

The ancient Celtic calendar grouped the season of spring into three full months too, but spring began in February rather than March. In pre-Christian times, a festival called Imbolc marked the beginning of spring. Later, St Brigid's Day, on February 1st, would signal the beginning of the season.

Flowers and Bees

For many people, the appearance of particular flowers are key signs of spring's arrival. Daffodils are bright splashes of colour that herald the new season. Bluebells carpet many woodland floors in vivid colour.

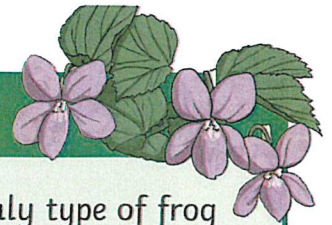
The buzzing of bees seeking nectar is a sound that is associated with spring and summer. Bumblebees, honeybees and wild solitary bees can be spotted in the gardens, countryside and even sand dunes of Northern Ireland.



Birds

Early morning birdsong provides a natural wake up call that generally begins in earnest in March. Birds are seeking to defend their territory and to find a mate. The annual International Dawn Chorus Day takes place on the first Sunday of May.

Swallows, chiffchaffs, house martins and swifts are some of the migrant birds that make a welcome springtime return from warmer climes. Birds will build their nests and have their chicks in spring.



New Life

Lambs are often born in spring. The ewes need lots of fresh grass so that they can make milk for the lambs. Spring's warmer days make it easier for baby animals to survive.

The common frog is the only type of frog found in Northern Ireland. They will lay their eggs (spawn) between late winter and early spring. The tadpoles will appear between February and May.

Mad March Hares

The Irish hare is one of Ireland's oldest mammals. It is found across the island, but nowhere else. Irish hare are a priority species in Northern Ireland. Hares live above ground; their homes are known as forms and their babies are called leverets. Hares are active mainly at night.

The behaviour of hares in springtime inspired the old expression, 'as mad as a March hare'. During the season, hares can be spotted 'boxing' one another, as

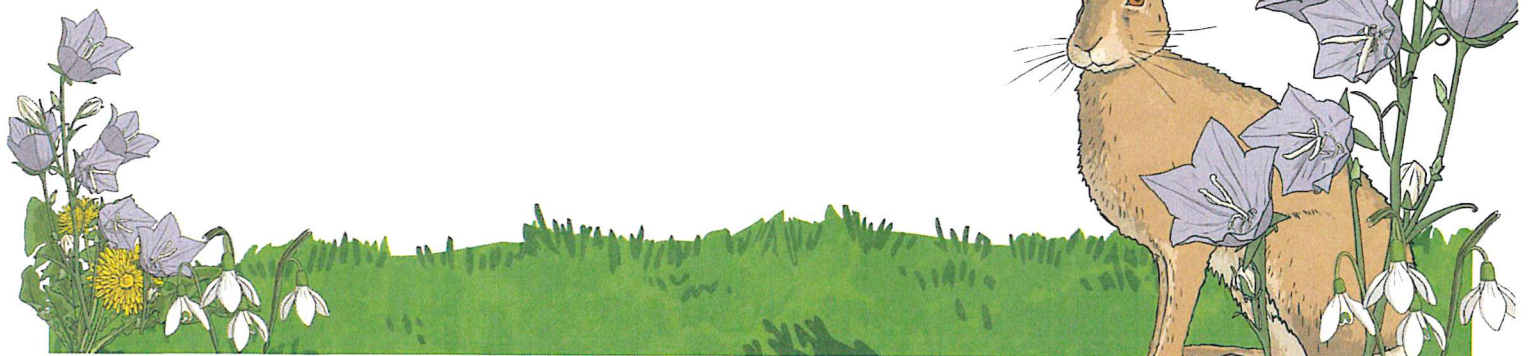
the females will sometimes fight off the attention of the males. Although these energetic displays of boxing and leaping don't only take place in March, this is a time when grass is shorter so there is more chance of spotting them. Displays of athleticism don't stop at boxing, either. Hares are fast too, they can run at speeds of up to 45 miles per hour!

Spring Holidays and Festivals

St Patrick's Day is celebrated on 17th March each year in honour of Ireland's patron saint. In the UK and Ireland, Mother's Day is celebrated three weeks before Easter Sunday. Easter Sunday itself is not on the same date each year. The date is actually calculated according to the lunar cycle and will fall on a Sunday between 22nd March and 25th April.

Waking from Hibernation

The arrival of spring is the wake up call for the two mammals that truly hibernate in Northern Ireland – bats and hedgehogs.



Questions

1. What mammals awaken from hibernation in spring in Northern Ireland?
 - swallows and chiffchaffs
 - hedgehogs and bats
 - hares and squirrels
2. According to the Celtic calendar, what were the three months of spring?
 - February, March and April
 - March, April and May
 - January, February, March
3. Is this sentence true or false? Tick one. 'Imbolc was an ancient Celtic festival that marked the end of winter.'
 - True
 - False

4. What is meteorology?

5. Name two saints associated with spring in Ireland.

6. What inspired the simile 'mad as a March hare'?

7. Why are lambs often born in spring?

8. What do you think 'lunar cycle' refers to?

9. Why might birds join the dawn chorus in springtime?
