



One swallow does not make a spring, but what about a swallowtail? April and June are both common months to see zebra swallowtails in Maryland, and we look forward to greeting them in the near future! The sun is returning, and with it, the spring migration of birds will soon be well underway. In light of the constantly changing temperatures, remember to refrain from cleaning up your garden until temperatures are above 50 degrees for several days in a row. Our native bees are late risers, an adaptation that allows them to avoid rising from hibernation before food is available!

We continue to contemplate the moon this season, with an overview of the spring moons and how they connect to Maryland's native plants. Our native plant profile focuses on one species of the slow-growing *Trillium* genus and its fascinating natural history. Rabbits are an ever-present symbol of the progress of spring, and our native animal focus this season is on the intersection of plants and animals, and how we can make our yards a welcoming habitat for our native rabbits. Finally, a topic that, despite its ephemeral nature, is making a very real mark on the lives of many of us: generative AI, and how to tell the difference between AI photos and videos of wildlife and those of the real, flesh-and-blood wildlife Marylanders who hop, fly, and swim through our lives.

■ *Team Habichat*

P.S. If you missed it in our first 2026 issue: our new herps poster series is [now available!](#) Please share with the educators in your communities, and don't forget to mention the [Project WILD](#) K-12 Curriculum. [Advanced training](#) (for PDP credit) being offered in August!



Zebra Swallowtail and Butterfly Weed by Michael Osborne, DNR Photo Contest 2018

"If you take a flower in your hand and really look at it, it's your world for a moment."

Georgia O'Keeffe

In This Issue:

Moon Mythology and Maryland Wildlife: Spring Moons

In our ongoing series, learn how the spring full moons receive their nicknames, and maybe consider creating our own. This modern folklore gives us an excellent opportunity to learn more about both the night sky and Maryland's wildlife!

Native Plant Profile: Toadshade

Many common plant names have the ability to conjure an evocative image, and the word "toadshade" is no exception. This common name, along with "sessile-flowered wake-robin" and "stinking benjamin," are all among the list of intriguing epithets for [*Trillium sessile*](#), one of Maryland's ten Trillium species.

Habitat Tips: Rabbit-Friendly Yards

Have you ever thought you could use **more** rabbits in your yard? Admittedly, it's not a request we often hear. Whether you love rabbits or hate them, better understanding these small mammals is the first and best step to coexisting. Here's some guidance for the *lovers* of lagomorphs on building a cozy wild rabbit habitat.

Did I really see that? A Guide to GenAI and Wildlife

Is scrolling through your feed of cute animals making you feel frustrated and confused lately? You're not alone; the rise of generative AI has resulted in a boom of fake pictures and videos of domesticated and wild animals alike. How can you tell the difference? Our strategies for identifying and avoiding being fooled by GenAI are here to help.

Moon Mythology and Maryland Wildlife: Spring Moons

By Katy Gorsuch



Super Pink Moon over Chesapeake Beach by Robert Fawcett, DNR Photo Contest 2021. The full Pink Moon was April 26 in 2021.

The weather's warming and the sunlight is lengthening, leading us all to spending more time outside. Continuing our exploration of the diverse and wonderful ecology of Maryland, we turn to the ephemeral spring moons and all they represent!

Recorded in English as far back [as 1779](#), Indigenous peoples of the Americas have named the full moons, often in alignment with animals responding to the changing seasons, or locally important events.

Full moon names varied widely depending on geographic location and language family amongst Native Americans. Also, some folk names for the full moons were created by European settlers or have even developed only in the past hundred years.

For our purposes, using supposed Algonquian full moon names as a starting point provides a wonderful opportunity for us to explore Maryland's unique wildlife, and how the seasons change!

Spring Moons:

April



Pink Creeping Phlox by Robert Severynse, DNR Photo Contest 2020

This moon is often called the **Pink Moon**, which has been attributed to the blooming of [moss phlox](#) (*Phlox subulata*) or the closely related creeping phlox (*Phlox stolonifera*). Another possible name for this moon may be the **Breaking Ice Moon**, so called for the warming of spring.

Both phlox plants have gained recent attention as [wonderful options to replace traditional lawns](#), as they tend to be a low-maintenance and low-profile groundcover, and a native plant that appeals to humans and pollinators alike. And while they are certainly at the peak of their blooms in April, they can bloom as early as February in Maryland, depending on the local conditions, and may produce flowers intermittently into September.

Phlox isn't the only native plant species that blooms a vivid pink.

[Redbud](#) (*Cercis canadensis*), a small to medium native tree, is another Maryland plant that blooms in April. Its vivid magenta flowers rival even the famous cherry blossoms in their showy colors! A gentler pink can be found in [Southern crabapples](#) and [sweet crabapples](#), both of which support pollinators and other native wildlife.

Wild geranium ([*Geranium maculatum*](#)) begins blooming in April, although it may be argued that it tends to be more on the purple side. Early azalea ([*Rhododendron prinophyllum*](#)) blooms in the mountains beginning in April as well, living up to its name!



Cercis Canadensis Flowers by Robert Severynse, DNR Photo Contest 2021

Many native plants, like flowering dogwood ([*Cornus florida*](#)), stop at pink on the way to white flowers, or mix pink and white like the pinxter flower ([*Rhododendron periclymenoides*](#)). As a bonus, the flowering dogwood also produces lovely red leaves in October and November and red berries birds enjoy in the fall/winter, providing color throughout the year.

In fact, if you were so inclined, you could have native pink flowers blooming in your garden for the whole growing season!

Pink-Flowered Native Plants of Maryland

	Low (Up to 12 inches)	Medium (12-36 inches)	Tall (36 inches and higher)
March	- Virginia springbeauty ☞ - Moss phlox	- Virginia bluebells ⚡	- Redbud
April	- Virginia springbeauty ☞ - Trailing arbutus ⚡ - Wild pink - Moss phlox *☞ - Creeping phlox - Violet Woodsorrel * - Rue Anemone ☞	- Virginia bluebells ⚡ - Wild geranium * - Pink lady's slipper	- Redbud - Southern crabapples ☞ - Sweet crabapples ☞ - Early azalea (mountain regions) - Pinxter flower - Flowering dogwood ⚡
May	- Wild pink - Moss phlox *☞ - Creeping phlox - Violet Woodsorrel *	- Common Fleabane ☞ - Wild geranium * - Pink lady's slipper	- Southern crabapples ☞ - Early azalea (mountain regions) - Pinxter flower - Flowering dogwood ⚡
June		- Wild geranium * - Common milkweed - Wild bergamot - Pink lady's slipper	- Swamp rose
July	- Maryland meadowbeauty ☞ - Virginia meadowbeauty	- Maryland meadowbeauty ☞ - Common milkweed - Wild bergamot - Rosepink	- Swamp rose - Swamp rose mallow ☞ - Swamp milkweed - Sweet Joe Pye weed - Hollow Joe Pye weed
August	- Maryland meadowbeauty ☞ - Virginia meadowbeauty - Spotted beebalm	- Maryland meadowbeauty ☞ - Wild bergamot - Rosepink - Spotted beebalm	- New York ironweed * - Swamp rose mallow ☞ - Swamp milkweed - Sweet Joe Pye weed - Hollow Joe Pye weed - Coastal Plain Joe Pye weed (coastal plain region)

*indicates pink through purple colorations

⚡indicates pink buds resolving to another color

☞ indicates pink through white variations

Notably, there are several invasive plants that bloom pink in April, and so are easier to remove due to their visibility, such as [Common Vetch](#) and [Incised Fumewort](#).

Suggested Pink Moon Activities: Plan your garden to include more native flowers! If pink isn't your color, choose another color and use the new [Maryland Native Plant Guide Piedmont Region](#) guide, or the [USFWS Native Plants for Wildlife Habitat and Conservation Landscaping: Chesapeake Bay Watershed](#) to plan your garden.

Consider converting at least a part of your lawn to moss phlox this year! It doesn't grow high – six inches is about the maximum height, which means far fewer sweaty days cutting away at non-native grasses that commonly make up lawns.

If phlox isn't your aesthetic choice, [check out our groundcover guide](#); there are many options to choose from if you'd like to forego mowing in the hot summer sun! For more information, even *more* groundcover options, see the read this [University of Maryland Extension article on groundcover options](#).

May

Flower Moon

Explorer Jonathan Carver, writing in 1779, cited May as the Flower Moon, and the name was supposedly common to several Indigenous peoples of the northern states. By May, many flowers are blooming across Maryland's diverse ecosystems!

We've discussed before the way [flowering plants use scent and color](#) to attract pollinators, but one of the less visible (to humans) elements of flower color can be their use of colors only seen under ultraviolet light. Human range of vision does not include much of the UV section of the electromagnetic spectrum, but many pollinators, including bees and butterflies, can see in wavelengths invisible to humans.

The range of color seen by bees is sometimes referred to as "[bee purple](#)," and while we cannot see in this spectrum, researchers have come up with many ways to visualize the patterns flower produce to draw pollinator attention to the flower's pollen and nectar.



Brandon Antonio Segura Torres & Priscilla Vieto Bonilla, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Photos of black-eyed susans taken using a bandpass filter to show UV patterns.

May is Gardening for Wildlife Month – a great time for contemplating how the flowers in your garden affect our native pollinators. Native flowers support more than just butterflies; many native moths, birds, and bees all feed directly directly from them, and bats, birds, frogs, and more eat the insects that feed off them! During the time of year when many bird species are raising their chicks, the protein of insects is a key element to their rapid growth. [96% of terrestrial birds](#) feed an insect diet to their babies, and

research shows it takes [6,000-9,000 insects](#) to raise a single brood of Carolina chickadees.



Blue Bird feeding time Rosedale Yannayon, DNR Photo Contest 2023

Suggested Flower Moon Activities: Continuing to work on your garden is an easy sell in the beautiful weather of May, so we'd like to challenge you to go one step further; replace an ornamental flower with a native flower or offer to plant one for a neighbor (bringing potted native flowers to your coworkers counts, we've decided).

If that doesn't strike your interest, join the Cornell Lab of Ornithology in their [Garden for Birds project](#), or get your yard certified as wildlife habitat with the National Wildlife Federation [through the National Aquarium](#), or a [Bay-Wise certification](#) through UMD Extension. Read more about each [habitat certification program here](#).

Learn more about gardening for wildlife [here](#) at the Wild Acres website!



Fragaria virginiana by [Walter Siegmund, CC BY-SA 3.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons

June

Strawberry Moon, Hot Moon

June has been referred to as either the **Strawberry Moon** or **Hot Moon**, depending on the source. While the humble North American strawberry species are always a worthy topic, thinking about water sources early in the season may prevent a hot month from becoming a sweltering one.

For wildlife, even a small amount of water can mean the difference between a suburban or urban habitat being tolerable or a desert. [Backyard ponds](#) are more familiar, but bird baths, [puddling stations](#) for bees and [butterflies](#), [rain gardens](#), and [water drips](#) are also all worthwhile features, and can be more manageable for many of us without the space, time, or ability to maintain a pond.

A common concern for standing water features is the possibility of creating a mosquito breeding location. For locations where the water is changed frequently, like a puddling station or bird bath, this is less of a concern; mosquito eggs need still water to hatch, and the larvae live in water until they are fully developed. This means that adding a pump, fountain, or waterfall feature to a pond can prevent larvae from surviving.

For locations where this isn't possible, larvae can be controlled using *Bacillus thuringiensis israelensis* (Bti) or *Bacillus sphaericus* (B. sphaericus). These are bacteria that act on mosquito larvae's ability to digest food, thus killing the larvae, but leaving other animals and people unharmed. Avoid using pesticides around water features; these kill more than the targeted species of insect and can be consumed by birds, amphibians, reptiles, and fish that may inhabit or drink from the water source.



Tiny Thirsty by Sharon Sexton, submitted to Maryland DNR Photo Contest 2019

Suggested Hot Moon Activities: Make sure your outdoor space has a water feature! Choose and install one that is easy for you to maintain, and place it somewhere quiet. Puddle containers and bird baths don't need to be expensive – a large ceramic bowl from a thrift store or unused clay pot bottom is just as effective and easier to clean than some more costly options.

For other ways to help wildlife this spring, check out our [Wild Acres resources!](#)

Native Plant Profile: Toadshade (*Trillium sessile*)

by Katy Gorsuch



[Andrew C, CC BY 2.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons

Many common plant names have the ability to conjure an evocative image, and those for [Trillium sessile](#) are no exception. Commonly known as “toadshade,” other epithets for this plant are “sessile trillium,” “sessile-flowered wake-robin,” and “stinking Benjamin.”

May I take your name?

“Sessile” typically means “seated,” but in this context means that the flower and or leaves are attached to the plant without their own distinct stalks. You can see where this terminology may have come from; the flower and leaves give the appearance of being set down on a stalk sticking out of the ground.



[Eric Hunt, CC BY-SA 4.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons

There are several other plants also referred to as “toadshade,” but nearly all of them belong to the same genus as *Trillium sessile*. Trilliums as a whole are often called “wakerobin” or “wake-robin,” as well as tri flower and birthroot. Carl Linnaeus originally classified trilliums as being in the lily family, which may account for the occasional common name of “wood lily” for trilliums, though they are now in the bunchflower family (Melanthiaceae).

“Toadshade” evokes the image of a frog sitting beneath the plant’s broad leaves. While records don’t seem to be available to confirm such a scene, it does not seem out of the realm of possibility.

“Tri flower” and “trillium” both come from the observation that many species of the genus have three petals to their flowers, with three leaves around them, and sessile trillium is no exception. [“Wake-robin” apparently originates](#) as a term associating the blooming of trilliums with the spring return of robins, being explained as such in 1863 by the naturalist John Burroughs.

However, the origins of “wake-robin” may be much more obscure. The term is cited as going back to at least 1711 by [Merriam-Webster](#) and to the mid 1500s by the [Oxford English Dictionary](#) (1530, John Palsgrave). It was used [in 1595 as part of an illness cure](#) in a reprinted book of remedies [written by an Italian alchemist](#), and in this case probably refers to *Arum maculatum*, a plant native to Europe that bears the same common name. Here, [as in another book printed in 1597](#), the word is spelled “wake Robin,” with Robin capitalized, as in a proper noun. Further muddying the original meaning of the name is

the fact that [by the 15th century](#), the fabled hero Robin Hood was closely associated with May Day celebrations in Britain, a common blooming time for many spring flowers. To add in further cultural context: Puck, in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is referred to as Robin Goodfellow, a name that was first recorded in 1531 (perhaps not coincidentally) and used several times in print throughout the 16th century leading up to the publication of the play. From this, the question arises as to whether the original name was related to the bird known as a robin at all!

Here and There

Toadshade is partial to woodland ecosystems, like many trilliums, of which there are ten species in Maryland. It does well in areas with limestone (and thus "calcareous" soils, which are made of calcium carbonate). These soils tend to have a higher pH than average, while most soils tend to be more acidic.

Toadshade also does well on riverbanks and tends to grow with other "[spring ephemerals](#)" (spring wildflowers with short, early blooming windows), like [Virginia bluebells](#). As such, there is a brief window to see them; late March into early May is usually the extent of the blooming season for *Trillium sessile* in Maryland.

The flower and its leaves tend to stand between 6 and 12 inches tall, in the rough shape of an umbrella. When toadshade does bloom, it opens a three-petaled flower with a deep burgundy color. The color serves as stark contrast to the mottled coloration that the leaves of the plant tends to take. Strikingly, this is where the term "stinking Benjamin" comes in. The flowers of toadshade are said to smell like carrion, which attracts the pollination efforts of flies. They aren't alone in this adaptation; [pawpaws](#) have a similar reproductive tactic.

Seed Needs

Trilliums have another trick up their sleeve – the ability to persuade ants to disperse their seeds. Plants that do this are "[myrmecochorous](#)," and trilliums accomplish this by producing a seed with an elaiosome, a nutrient-rich bit attached to a seed. After the snack-incentive is removed, the seed is discarded, and the parent plant has thus accomplished the dispersal of its offspring.

Finally, due to its preferred growing locations and timing, and the average size of the vast majority of Maryland frogs and toads, it is conceivable that a frog or toad may sit underneath a toadshade. So when spring gets hectic in these coming weeks, carry that thought with you, and let the fascinating world of native Maryland plants buoy your spirit!

To read more about the enthralling [native plants of Maryland](#), including pieces you may have missed, check out the [Habichat archives](#)!

Habitat Tip: Rabbit-Friendly Yards



Rabbit, Close to Home by Sharon Wells

Have you ever thought you could use **more** rabbits in your yard? Usually, gardeners are to rid their gardens of animals that eat their well-manicured plants. And for that purpose, there are plenty of lists of rabbit-resistant plants that feature strong fragrance, fuzzy or prickly textures, or defense mechanisms involving toxicity or an unpleasant taste.

But for those lovers of lagomorphs, here's some guidance on building a cozy wild rabbit habitat.

Order Lagomorpha is the group of rabbits and rabbit-like cousins proudly taking its place in the mammalian family tree. Contrary to popular belief, rabbits are NOT rodents! They do share certain characteristics with rodents, like ever-growing teeth and good looks, but quite a few qualities set them apart. Rabbits have four upper incisor teeth with a small pair called "[peg teeth](#)" hidden behind the larger pair we're used to seeing, as exemplified by Bugs Bunny. These peg teeth play a role in slicing up plant material into tiny digestible pieces. Anyone who's had a pet rabbit knows that they cannot subsist on carrots – in fact, feeding a rabbit anything but a varied and precise diet can cause digestive distress and can be fatal.

Rabbits also engage in a behavior called "[coprophagy](#)" – meaning eating their own poop. Sounds gross, but the reingestion of uniquely excreted soft feces pellets, rich in vitamins and

nutrients, is physiologically necessary for this species. Despite this less-than-glamorous quality, rabbits are not only cute, but incredibly social and sensitive creatures.

Here in Maryland we have two species of rabbit: the very common [Eastern cottontail](#) and the more elusive [Appalachian cottontail](#) in Western Maryland. Both play a vital role in a wide variety of Maryland ecosystems, providing seed dispersal, soil aeration, and fertilization, and they provide a readily available meat source for numerous predators. Creating the right habitat for a wild rabbit community, even if that means sacrificing a few plants, can reward you with amazing wildlife viewing opportunities – and who can resist the sight of a baby bunny in the spring?

Creating great rabbit habitat means paying attention to the big three factors – food, [water](#), and shelter – and tailoring them to small mammal preferences. Shelter from those aforementioned predators is important. A great first step is to create a brush pile. [Wild Acres has guidance on this](#) if it's your first time. If this approach doesn't appeal, encouraging natural cover like multi-stem varieties of dogwood and buttonbush, maintained at chest height and planted close together, can also make ideal woody cover – with the added benefit of providing snacks in the bark. Another option is Rosaceae family shrubs planted together to form patches of cover with thorns that will deter any hostile predator in their right mind. This includes native blackberries, native roses, native [plums](#), hawthorn, etc. Many of these are seasonally available to order from the Department of Natural Resources [state nursery](#). Tall native grasses like bluestems, ryes, and panicgrasses can also provide shelter. More than anything, incorporating a diverse array of cover types helps to ensure continuous shelter throughout the year. Woody structure that is overlooked during the growing season when leafy cover is common can become crucial in winter months after the leaves fall.

Rabbits are *not* picky eaters but they do prefer native plants. In a [2023 study in New England](#), scientists analyzed DNA pulled from rabbit pellets to fully understand their diet. The researchers detected 50 different genera of plants in the cottontail pellets collected, and that was during the winter. The conclusions backed up what was found in numerous prior studies: cottontails are true generalists, but prefer the foods their bodies have adapted to over countless generations in North America. There are a few exceptions to this rule, such as the historic tale told in John Mash's book, *The Land of the Living: The Tale of Maryland's Green Ridge Forest* (2003). Some of the land that would become Green Ridge State Forest was denuded around 1900 by an influential family around 1900 looking to plant vast fruit orchards. Their dream was thwarted by rabbits, which became extremely abundant and destructive to the non-native fruit trees. The landowner deployed thousands of steel cages to protect the young trees; and remnant cages can still be found on the Green Ridge property.

Provided you avoid those plants listed as rabbit "resistant," small native shrubs and herbaceous flowering plants are your best bet for bunny buffets. If you're more limited in space or what you can plant, avoiding fixation with a mowed lawn is a good place to start, while encouraging growth of other low-growing herbaceous and [pollinator-friendly](#) plants. With these tips in mind, if rabbits are anywhere in your area, they'll eventually find your backyard habitat.

Below is a list of plants noted for rabbit resistance, courtesy the University of Maryland Extension [MD Native Plants Program](#).

<i>Actaea pachypoda</i>	White baneberry, doll's eyes
<i>Allium canadense</i>	Wild onion, meadow garlic
<i>Aquilegia canadensis</i>	Red columbine, wild/eastern columbine
<i>Asarum canadense</i>	Wild ginger
<i>Baptisia australis</i>	False blue indigo, blue wild indigo
<i>Clinopodium vulgare</i>	Wild basil
<i>Desmodium perplexum</i>	Perplexing tick-trefoil
<i>Eupatorium rotundifolium</i>	Roundleaf thoroughwort
<i>Monarda didyma</i>	Scarlet beebalm
<i>Monarda punctata</i>	Spotted beebalm
<i>Packera anonyma</i>	Small's ragwort
<i>Scutellaria elliptica</i>	Hairy skullcap
<i>Scutellaria incana</i>	Hoary skullcap
<i>Scutellaria lateriflora</i>	Mad-dog skullcap
<i>Thalictrum pubescens</i>	Tall meadow rue
<i>Thalictrum thalictroides</i>	Rue anemone
<i>Veratrum virginicum</i>	Virginia bunchflower
<i>Verbesina alternifolia</i>	Wingstem
<i>Yucca filamentosa</i>	Adam's needle
<i>Asplenium platyneuron</i>	Ebony spleenwort
<i>Athyrium filix-femina var. angustum</i>	Northern lady fern
<i>Athyrium filix-femina var. asplenioides</i>	Southern lady fern
<i>Dennstaedtia punctilobula</i>	Eastern hayscented fern
<i>Dryopteris carthusiana</i>	Spinulose/toothed wood fern, shield fern
<i>Dryopteris intermedia</i>	Intermediate wood fern, fancy fern

<i>Lorinseria areolata</i>	Netted chain fern
<i>Matteuccia struthiopteris</i>	Ostrich fern
<i>Onoclea sensibilis</i>	Sensitive fern
<i>Osmundastrum cinnamomeum</i>	Cinnamon fern
<i>Phegopteris hexagonoptera</i>	Broad beech fern
<i>Polypodium virginianum</i>	Common polypody, common rockcap fern
<i>Carex pensylvanica</i>	Pennsylvania sedge
<i>Dryopteris marginalis</i>	Marginal wood fern, shield/leatherleaf fern

**Chart caption: a list of plants

"The truth is a rabbit in a bramble patch. And you can't lay your hand on it. All you do is circle around and point, and say, 'It's in there somewhere.'" ~ Pete Seeger

Is That Real? A Guide to Identifying Fake Wildlife Videos Created with Generative AI



Author's Note: despite resemblance to current GenAI visuals, [this image by user sunny305](#) was published in 2021, prior to the AI boom, and is likely representative of the skill of digital Photoshop artists.

In the head-spinning, ever-expanding world of generative AI, a particularly popular niche is being cultivated that could cause long-term damage to wildlife and the way humans interact with them: fake animal videos.

Picture seeing this on your feed: It's dark, in a fenced backyard, and nocturnal animals are out to explore. In the video, a group of bunnies on the edge of a trampoline investigate the surface, venturing forward, and then, realizing the springiness of the black mesh, begin to bounce. Soon the whole group is bouncing with enthusiasm.

But, there are some issues. What seemed to be seven bunnies at the beginning of the video turns into six by the time they're bouncing. They're unusually blond for wild rabbits, and their color patterns seem to disappear. In fact one of the bouncing bunnies *does* disappear! What eerie, sinister rabbits are these, who morph their shapes and flicker out of existence?

[This video isn't real](#); it was generated by a computer in what is now known as generative artificial intelligence. Generative AI is rooted in large language models, which

take in massive amounts of data to make a predictive guess on what to generate based on the examples in its model. [A large language model doesn't "think."](#) any more than any other software does.

The results of an LLM's guesses can be unexpected. Hence, rabbit ears that are reabsorbed into another rabbit's fluffy butt—the model doesn't know that this shouldn't occur, only that when many rabbits are crowded together, ears unattached to a rabbit's head may appear over the other's back.

A large language model doesn't think—it reproduces what it has seen from the data it's been given, and so has [less object permanence than a baby](#).

These types of videos are racking up millions of impressions and being posted on social media sites by thousands of social media “creators” every month. Some social media apps such as Facebook and Instagram [have posted policies](#) requiring users to label AI-created images and videos as made with AI, others such as X do not currently require all users to do so.

However, enforcement by the social media companies is often scattershot and many users deceive others by hiding the required “made with AI” lines at the very end of a line of text or don't follow the rules at all. For example, this [Instagram video of eagles stepping in wet concrete](#) as construction workers look on has no clear “made with AI” identifier and the caption makes it seem as if it really happened, despite being posted on Instagram.

When large language models make mistakes that it assumes are factual, the technical term for these mistakes are “[hallucinations](#).” Studies have shown that [hallucinations are inevitable](#) with the nature of the technology, according to a 2025 study by researchers at the University of Singapore. Because a large language model must act on its own prediction to proceed, errors build on each other, and newer generative AI models are [showing more errors](#) rather than fewer.

System Overload

While it may seem innocuous, the misinformation spread by these kinds of posts causes more harm than can be seen from the surface.

Cultural depictions of animals can sway the public's feelings about wildlife. The movie “Jaws,” released 51 years ago, contributed to longstanding negative perceptions of sharks and may have influenced an uptick in the killing of sharks. Today, fake content about wild animals that proliferates on social media could give people the wrong ideas about how animals behave or how to interact with nature safely.

Most of us going for a hike don't expect to encounter a possibly dangerous animal, but if we did, would we know how to respond? Even if you knew, what about your neighbor or older uncle? If they saw a video of a grizzly bear licking a kitten, would they know this is not a likely occurrence? Would a child who has grown up with feel-good fake animal videos their whole life be able to guess this is not real?

The price of a generative AI video like this could be a life.

Dangers like these are already apparent in the spawning of hoards of [AI-written mushroom guides](#). As any forager knows, identification of edible foods in the wild is already a serious process, and no single item more so than mushrooms. North America has several deadly mushroom species that look nearly identical to edible ones and can only be told apart by the most experienced mycologists. A recent [alarming uptick in mushroom poisonings in California](#) underlines the danger; such poisonous fungi can kill in the space of hours and may [cause irreparable damage](#) to your body if you survive.

It's not just safety that this kind of information can affect; our sense of awe and wonder in the world around us is an unintended casualty of the proliferation of convincing fakes. [Creativity has been shown to suffer](#) too as a side effect of using AI tools; why think when a [machine is doing it for you](#)?

Reading Between the Code

There are some common ways to tell whether the video you're watching is generative AI:

Video length: Most generative AI video sources can only generate 30 seconds of video at a time and have little consistency. LLMs often don't have much memory, and each prompt given to the software will result in a new video. Thus the model will slightly, or even dramatically, change the appearance of characters in the video from prompt to prompt or even from scene to scene. Some video prompters have come up with complicated workarounds for consistency, but for the time being, most accounts intentionally posting generative AI videos won't go through that amount of work.

Consider the source: Often AI accounts will post multiple versions of similar videos, with the hope that one will get views and likes, leading to monetization. Does the source have many similar videos, or does the video seem to have an agenda? Is the source a new account or one that doesn't seem able to respond? Many of these types of accounts across platforms profit from clickbait and false information.

Visual clues: A few years ago, counting the fingers on the hand of a suspected AI photo was an easy way to tell a fake image. While large language models have gotten more complex, glitches do happen, as in the bunny-trampoline video. Mistakes may also be more subtle, so here are some questions to ask yourself:

- Do the colors, size, or movement of the animal appear natural?
- What about the setting?
- Do straight lines like teeth, bricks, tiles, or walls blur or disappear?
- Can you tell where the light in the video is coming from (e.g., the sun or a lamp)?
- Does the direction of the light change? Do shadows move on their own?
- Does the video quality make sense? One of the reasons the bunny video fools us is that it looks like security footage, and we expect low resolution.

Date of media: If a video or image was posted before 2022, there is a much higher chance of it being authentic. Before easy public access to generative AI tools, making a convincing fake image required significantly more work on the part of an individual.

Reverse Image Search: There are several versions of this on different search engines, but the idea is that if you put in an image, it will pull up all the sites where the image can be found. This is useful for finding the first time it may have been posted, which can help you determine if the image is real, or possibly a fake that resurfaces every few years.

Content of video: Ask yourself if the behavior makes sense. If this factually happens in nature, there will likely be other videos or writing about it. Consult expert sites and reliable forum posts to determine what may really happen; search engines may end up bringing up sites and pages that only exist for clicks, so try to use verified sources as much as possible. AI detectors, unfortunately, aren't always accurate and appear to become less accurate over time.

Trustworthy Sources

The best way to determine the reality of what you see is to have places to turn for expert opinions.

Here are some commonly used (even by wildlife biologists) resources for identifying wildlife and learning about behavior:

- **iNaturalist**: iNaturalist is a community science app and website where anyone can upload photos from animals to plants to fungi and rely on real people to assist them with an identification, often very quickly. iNaturalist also offers the ability to look through hundreds of photos of common wildlife, allowing someone seeking an ID to see unusual traits that might occur in a species. Did you see a molting screech owl? There will be pictures of one for you to compare it to!

- **[Merlin](#)**: Merlin is a bird-specific app and website in a similar vein to iNaturalist, but which has birdsong samples available to verify your identification. It's a favorite of hardcore birders and has earned the reputation.
- **[Maryland Biodiversity Project](#)**: Since 2012, MBP has had the mission of cataloguing the life found in the borders of our state, and they are thorough!
- **Other Wildlife Organizations**: [eBird](#), [All About Birds](#), [Audubon](#), and [Birds of the World](#) are all great resources for bird behavior that might not be "typical," or may be more rarely seen.
- **[Maryland Plant Atlas](#)**: Localized information about Maryland's plants!
- **[HerpMapper](#)** is similar to iNaturalist, but for amphibians and reptiles.
- **Local Wildlife Groups**: Your biggest asset in determining you're getting correct information is the experience of people well-versed in their local wildlife. Compiling your groups' collective knowledge will often supersede researching on your own; for example, a birding group with variable experience may together have over a century of experience. Humans have always shared collective knowledge, and times like this show how important that habit is.

Referencing these sources for ID takes longer than asking an AI assistant, but is well worth the effort and allows you to learn new things in the process.

Be vigilant when you see something you aren't sure of, and if you think it might be AI, don't share it. Sharing reinforces and spreads misinformation and encourages the creation of new posts. Social media and AI companies make significant money off our usage, even when we don't ask for it (and many people don't). It's easy to blame others for sharing, but remember that they are facing the same uncertainty we are.

The real world, and the real wonders found in it, are worth fighting for. Surrounded by so much that is artificial, make sure that you're appreciating nature that is real. There's great wildlife material out there, without resorting to crude imitations and impossible bunnies.