

Harbingers

LEAVES OF THE WILLOWS, alders and cottonwoods have long since come tumbling down. Bacteria and rains have begun recycling the leaves' nutrients back to the soil, aided by the warmth of the sun filtering around the bare-boned limbs of the valley's deciduous trees.

But look again—there's activity stirring. Pussy willow catkins near the bottom of slender willow branches are starting to change. Yellow flower parts are sprouting from the fluffy gray "cat's tails."

As the weather warms, the yellow pollen on the male flowers will attract the bees. Some pollen will stick to the hairs on their bodies. Then they will be drawn by the fragrant scent of the female flower's promising sweet nectar, resulting in fertilization.

But for now a leafless alder alongside the river is alive with goldfinches acrobatically visiting female catkins that resemble tiny pine cones, searching for winged nutlets.

And swelling buds presage action along the branches of the towering Fremont cottonwood trees named for John Fremont. The explorer-Army officer wrote of the tree in his diary Jan. 6, 1844 while on his second Western expedition:

"Taking Kit Carson with me I made a thorough exploration of the neighboring valleys and found in a ravine in the bordering mountains a good camping place where was water in springs and sufficient quantity of grass for a night. Overshadowing the spring were some trees of the sweet cottonwood which after a long interval of absence we saw again with pleasure, regarding them as harbingers of better country."

And so it is today, the increased stirrings of life in the cottonwoods, willows, and alders are silent harbingers of spring along the valley's water courses



Goldfinches