NATURE BECKONS

Compiled by Scott Keepler, Outdoors Editor



Night calls: Listen for the nocturnal calls of the whip-poor-will this time of year. This bird calls its own name loudly, but don't expect to see the bird – it ranks as the best-camouflaged of all birds with its black, brown and gray feathers.



Familiar call: The Eastern phoebe is back after spending its winter in Mexico. This gray, sparrow-sized bird, which nests almost exclusively on ledges, features a distinctive call that gives away its own name – "phoebe, phoebe" – and a wagging tail.



Little ears: Hikers are bound to happen upon the mouse-eared chickweed when walking the woods this time of year. A small plant usually 6 to 8 inches tall, chickweed has white flowers with five lobed petals that resemble mouse ears.



Wayward egg: If you see a larger, speckled egg in a bird's nest with smaller eggs, it's the work of a cowbird. It's not a good idea to remove the cowbird egg, because they typically come back and check on their eggs and will exact revenge if it's missing.



House cleaning: Wood duck boxes should be cleaned now. Don't mess with a box that already contains eggs, but if it doesn't, place some hardwood shavings in the box and a no-pest strip to the inside roof to discourage wasps from taking up residence, too.



Striped snake: Because of their ability to tolerate cool weather, garter snakes typically are the first to emerge each spring. This harmless but ill-tempered snake – the most common in the Upstate – is usually brown with yellow stripes.



Mountain music: Hikers may hear the "drumming" of the ruffed grouse in the mountains this time of year. This chicken-sized upland bird is not abundant, but may occasionally be heard beating its wings in remote, deep-woods locales.



Big and beautiful: Look for Tiger swallowtail butterflies to begin appearing any day now along fields, woodland edges and back yards. These large butterflies are bright yellow and black, with blue markings at the bases of their wings.