

# LEARNING AHEAD

CULTURAL ITINERARY FOR WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS



**HilltownFamilies.org**  
COMMUNITY-BASED EDUCATION NETWORK

***Learning Ahead:***  
***Cultural Itinerary for Western Massachusetts***  
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# Learning Ahead:

Cultural Itinerary for Western Massachusetts

Seasons: March & April

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Hilltown Families, Inc.  
[www.HilltownFamilies.org](http://www.HilltownFamilies.org)

# SEASONS MAR & APR

Who am I? Where am I? These are the fundamental questions proposed by the humanities. Inquiries related to local **history, literature, and education** inspire us to think deeply about the places where we live and how our identity fits into the context of our community and the seasons.

Looking through a seasonal lens, a March and April cultural itinerary for Western Massachusetts includes:

- First harvest of the year reunites us to seasonal **FOOD TRADITIONS**: Maple Syrup
- Local **HABITAT** awakens us to the changing seasons: Vernal Pools
- Local Changemakers as a **CATALYST** for learning: Women's History Month
- **INTERGENERATIONAL** sharing of the joys of native species: Spring Birds
- **NATURE-BASED** activities connect us to local poets: National Poetry Month
- Learning through the **LENS** of spring holidays: Easter & Passover
- **VALUE-BASED** engagement connects interests: Earth Day
- Discover seasonal **CULTURE**: Sheep Shearing

"Spring" by Mary Oliver

Somewhere  
a black bear  
has just risen from sleep  
and is staring  
down the mountain.  
All night  
in the brisk and shallow restlessness  
of early spring  
I think of her,  
her four black fists  
flicking the gravel,  
her tongue  
like a red fire  
touching the grass,  
the cold water.  
There is only one question:  
how to love this world.  
I think of her  
rising  
like a black and leafy ledge  
to sharpen her claws against  
the silence  
of the trees.  
Whatever else  
my life is  
with its poems  
and its music  
and its glass cities,  
it is also this dazzling darkness  
coming  
down the mountain,  
breathing and tasting;  
all day I think of her—  
her white teeth,  
her wordlessness,  
her perfect love.





Maple Syrup Samples in Ashfield, MA  
Photo Credit: Sienna Wildfield

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# March

## Sugar Season: Food History, Celebrations, Art & Poetry

It's March. The light is changing, the days are getting longer, and the ground slowly begins to thaw. As spring rounds the corner, March becomes the month of gathering and beginning, of re-emergence and sharing. Early in the month it might feel like winter outside, but rest assured that spring is stirring underneath blankets of snow. **March is sugar season!**



Maple Spile in Cummington, MA  
Photo Credit: Sienna Wildfield

While April and May showcase new life in full force, March is a transitional time of year when we are reminded strongly of New England's cycles. As the temperatures rise during the day and cool down to freezing at night, sap begins to flow through the sapwood of the sugar maples. These native trees are tapped during this time of temperature fluctuation to capture their sap that will eventually be boiled down into delicious sweet maple syrup - ah yes, *liquid gold!*

Let sugar season be a time of year for reconnecting to community and strengthening your sense of place through value-based community engagement that supports learning. Living history museums, annual events, sugar shacks and community breakfasts await us this time of year as we shake off the winter months. April and May might be filled with the blossoms of spring, but there is no need for flowers when we have sweet maple syrup to enjoy on our pancakes with family and friends!

## New England Traditions: Maple Sugaring & Local History

Before the arrival of European settlers, Native Americans were already tapping sugar maples and processing maple sugar in the early 1600's. Early Native Americans would move their whole families to a location in the woods where there were plenty of sugar maples to tap. They would set up a sugar camp and create V-shaped slashes in the tree as a method to collect the sap. Since they did not yet have metal pots for boiling, the collected sap was placed in a wooden vessel and hot rocks were added to help boil away the water to create a syrupy consistency.

The Native Americans in New England used maple syrup to make **grain sugar**, **cake sugar**, and **wax sugar**. Grain sugar is similar to what we now refer to as brown sugar. Cake sugar was in block form, shaped by pouring the syrup into molds and allowing it to harden. This made it easier to store. Finally, wax sugar is what we know as **sugar on snow**. It's the pouring of maple syrup heated to high temperatures on the snow to create a taffy-like consistency to enjoy.

In the 1790's, European settlers decided to drill a small hole into the trunk, rather than create V-shaped slashes. This method is still used today for sap collection. By drilling a



Maple Buckets in Chesterfield, MA  
Photo Credit: Sienna Wildfield



hole, the sap was allowed to drip into a vessel for collection to be boiled down into syrup in large metal pots. The syrup was then poured into molds to create sugar blocks, as maple sugar was historically more common than maple syrup. The maple sugar produced from sugaring became an important commodity for New England colonists as it was sold and traded.

## Living History Museums During Sugar Season

In Western Massachusetts, living history museums celebrate local history and early American living through maple sugaring demonstrations that recall the techniques, foods, and traditions connected to the sugaring season. Families can experience what maple sugaring was like in the days of old New England at living history events where museum interpreters dressed in period clothing demonstrate life and skills from Colonial New England, including: tree tapping, sumac spile making, sap boiling over a fire, open hearth cooking, and other early American skills.



Maple Spile in Buckland, MA  
Photo Credit: Sienna Wildfield

Every March, **Old Sturbridge Village** hosts **Maple Days**. For four weekends, visitors to the museum can learn how 19th century New Englanders processed maple syrup

through hands-on demonstrations, giving them the opportunity to see the entire process from when the trees are tapped to sugaring off to cooking demonstrations of period foods with maple products.

**Storowton Village Museum** in West Springfield also hosts an annual **Maple Harvest Day** for the community to learn about the historic tradition of maple sugaring through tree tapping and sap boiling demonstrations. Celebrate the soon-to-come warmer weather with your fellow community members at the Gilbert Farmstead home while also enjoying open hearth cooking demonstrations.

## Sharing Food & Culture: Community Meals & Celebrations

### Sugar Shacks

Sugar shacks are small cabins where maple sap is gathered and boiled down to syrup. Tours of sugar shacks are primary-source opportunities to learn about local history, New England culture, local economy and technology. These community resources are not only producers of maple syrup but also turn into bustling kitchens and community eating spaces for neighbors, families and friends to gather and share a pancake breakfast together in honor of the sugaring season! Eating a pancake breakfast at a local sugar shack is a true community experience! Since most sugar shacks are not year-round eating establishments, they convert their existing spaces into eateries with large communal tables. Even though you may have to wait a little bit to be seated, it's such a fun way to meet new neighbors and learn about the sugaring process!



**Sugar Shack in Ashfield, MA**  
Photo Credit: Sienna Wildfield



At the **North Hadley Sugar Shack** you can walk into the boiling room while you wait for your table to be ready and see firsthand how modern farms tap trees and what methods are used for the boiling process. Additionally, the North Hadley Sugar Shack offers demonstrations, samples and tastings for their visitors to learn about maple syrup.

There are many other sugar shacks all over Western Massachusetts in the four counties. They host pancake breakfasts and demonstrations, and provide the opportunity for folks to purchase locally produced maple syrup during sugar season. To see which sugar shack is closest to you, **MassMaple.org** has a comprehensive list of sugar shacks in Massachusetts. This web site is also a resource for learning more about the history of maple sugaring in New England, including a detailed timeline of sugaring in New England that also discusses the introduction of various sugaring techniques from pre-colonial times to the late 1990's.

When visiting a sugar shack, dress warmly, arrive curious, and ask questions:

- How much sap makes a gallon of syrup?
- What are the different grades of maple syrup?
- How does the weather affect syrup production? Why?

## **Community Celebrations**

Looking for more ways to celebrate sugaring season? How about a maple festival? The town of **Chester** hosts an annual **Maple Fest & Craft Fair** during the sugaring season with a community pancake breakfast and a craft fair full of local vendors selling crafts, maple products, and other one-of-a-kind local handmade items.

Did you know that **Williams College** in Williamstown produces its own maple syrup? Each year the Hopkins Memorial Forest at Williams College hosts a **Maple Fest**. This community festival features various hands-on activities that support an interest in historic and contemporary methods of gathering and processing maple syrup, including: a working sugar house, an old kettle boiler, tapping of maple trees, wood splitting demonstrations, syrup tasting, and a community pancake breakfast.

# The Inspiring Maple Tree: The Art & Literature of Seasonal Living

## Robert Strong Woodward

Western Massachusetts landscape painter, **Robert Strong Woodward** (1885-1957) was born in Northampton, MA and settled in Buckland where he painted along with a studio in Heath where he produced many works. Woodward was a landscape painter mostly depicting the rural countryside and living that surrounded him. One of the themes he explored is the sugaring season.

You can view Woodward's works at the website run by the nonprofit Friends of Woodward, **[robertstrongwoodward.com](http://robertstrongwoodward.com)**.

One painting in particular, **Late Sugaring**, shows maple trees with red tapping buckets along Route 112 in Buckland. Painted in 1934, this image is a typical New England

scene that one can still witness driving along the same road in the Hilltowns of Western Massachusetts. This beautiful region, largely unchanged throughout the decades, still offers that majestic New England experience that Woodward captures in this painting. An online gallery of Woodward's sugaring paintings is also found at Friends of Woodward's web site. Peruse the gallery before heading over to a local sugar shack this season for breakfast and arrive curious. What has changed over the years? What is the same??



Red Maple Buckets in Worthington, MA  
Photo Credit: Sienna Wildfield



Maple Buckets in Chesterfield, MA  
Photo Credit: Sienna Wildfield

## Hannah Fries

Sugar season and the sugar maple tree have inspired local artists and writers in their creative work. Western Massachusetts poet **Hannah Fries' "Naming the Trees"** from her 2016 collection of poetry *Little Terrarium* is a love poem that takes the reader with her and her lover along a walk in the woods in early spring. They attempt to name the trees based on their bark, since the leaves are not yet out in March. (Read the full poem at [hawkandhandsaw.unity.edu/another-post-here](http://hawkandhandsaw.unity.edu/another-post-here).)

The last stanza specifically refers to the sugar maple. Notice how the poet uses the taste of syrup and its sweetness to describe the sensation that the two lovers feel when they are together. She takes the seasonality of New England living and rural life to describe a shared sentiment felt by

two people in love. The word "sweetness" refers to the syrup's taste, but more importantly, to what the two people already experience and know with each other.

"Sugar maple, we say, and it is on our tongues:  
Tap it now, in March,  
the ground a mash of snow and mud, sap rising  
from the roots, clear drop on the finger:  
small sweetness we taste because we know it's there."

You can learn more about poet Hannah Fries at [www.hannahfries.com](http://www.hannahfries.com).



**New Life:  
Vernal Pools, Local  
Farms, Poetry &  
Literature**

**Exploring Spring's Landscape  
through Vernal Pools & Literature**

Similar to fall, the spring season is a time of transition as habitats and animals begin to respond to the change in weather and climate. Phenology-based activities coincide with the natural changing of our seasons (our ultimate accessible community-based educational resource)

and are great catalysts for learning through community engagement. Maple syrup season, filled with delicious community activities and opportunities, is our first crop of the year, followed by another seasonal event as winter transitions into spring...**Vernal Pools!**

Vernal Pools are temporary pools of water that emerge and come to life during this season, offering animals and plants a distinctive habitat. Many amphibians and



**Spotted Salamander. Vernal Pool in W. Chesterfield, MA**  
Photo Credit: Sienna Wildfield

insects utilize vernal pools for egg-laying because vernal pools provide a safe habitat devoid of fish for young amphibians and insects to survive and grow. The most common inhabitants of vernal pools are frogs and toads. There are many places in Western Massachusetts where one can explore the ecology, habitat and wildlife of vernal pools. Below are a few local places to discover vernal pools.

Methods of engagement as they relate to Vernal Pools can range from ecology to natural history, entomology to zoology, scientific process to art. **Mount Warner Reservation** in Hadley, **Hitchcock Center** in Amherst, **Arcadia Wildlife Sanctuary** in Easthampton, and **Pioneer Valley Citizen Science** are resources with events and opportunities during the brief season of vernal pools.

Pair your explorations of vernal pools in your local landscape with the poetry of **Robert Frost**, comparing your experiences through both nature-based explorations and the language arts. **Spring Pools** by Robert Frost, observes the temporary nature of vernal pools. It's a short poem that uses strong imagery to emphasize the impermanent nature of this spring time habitat and reflects on the concept of ephemerality.

## **Local Agriculture: Spring on the Farm**

Farm life follows the path of the seasons. In March and April, it's time to start planting leafy greens and root crops as one prepares for the warmer months ahead. It is also a time of new life on a farm when animals are born. At **living history museums** such as **Old Sturbridge Village** and the **Hancock Shaker Village** in Pittsfield, MA, folks can visit baby animals each spring such as newborn lambs, calves, and piglets! Curious to know more about some of the historic heritage breeds at history museums such as Old Sturbridge Village? On this webpage you can explore the different breeds that OSV raises that were common in the 19th century: [www.osv.org/animals](http://www.osv.org/animals).

The most place-based of local baby animal-learning resources in Western Massachusetts are of course our **local farms**, many of which allow visitors to meet the animals they raise and rely upon both for food and for farm tasks. There are many different farm animals raised in Western Massachusetts, and each farm has a different animal-related story and history to tell. A dairy farm can teach families about raising cows for milk and how milk was once stored, while a fiber farm's focus may be on how to raise a healthy family of sheep and rabbits that generate the best fiber. In addition to learning about the role of animals in farming, a farm visit can teach us that not all fascinating animals are exotic - there are plenty of species found close to home that are every bit as fascinating as those found across an ocean. Using **CISA's Fun on the**



**Farm petting zoo finder**, look for a farm near you that allows visitors to meet baby farm animals.

Many books have been written about life on a farm and seasonal living. Check out the following books at your local library to gain a deeper appreciation for farm life and the experiences farmers endure when caring for their land and the food they grow for their communities.

- *The Dirty Life: A Memoir of Farming, Food and Love* by Kristin Kimball
- *Cold Antler Farm: A Memoir of Growing Food and Celebrating Life on a Scrappy Six-Acre Homestead* by Jenna Woginrich
- *Blessing the Hands That Feed Us: Lessons from a 10 Mile Diet* by Vicki Robin



Lamb in Buckland, MA  
Photo Credit: Sienna Wildfield

## Women's History: Changemakers, Poets, Artists & Higher Education

### Western Massachusetts Changemakers

Western Massachusetts is home to so many **women changemakers** who have dedicated their lives to enacting social change through the arts, critical inquiry, and learning. Still today, there are many women poets, writers, activists, artists, teachers, educators, and scientists that reside in Western

Massachusetts and continue to work towards positive social change that fosters female empowerment, diversity and making women's voices even louder in our globalized society and economy. Here, only a few women from history will be explored, however note the incredible number of talented women today in Western Massachusetts that continue to demonstrate the importance of women's rights. **March is Women's History Month**, a national observation that honors and pays tributes to those women who dedicated their lives to social justice, the environment, education, and positive change for society. Their fortitude and perseverance as pioneers is honored during the month of March.

#### Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

Poet Emily Dickinson's works are considered to have revolutionized American verse. Originally from Amherst, MA, Dickinson attended Mount Holyoke College and devoted her life's poetic work to serious intellectual inquiry, creativity and curiosity. As a result, she composed over 1,100 poems during her 20's and 30's. Her work was largely unpublished at the time of her death in 1886. It wasn't until after her death that her work was brought to public attention through the efforts of family and friends.

The **Emily Dickinson Museum** in Amherst, MA provides the Western Massachusetts community the opportunity to explore Dickinson's life, homestead and poetry. The museum's mission "is to educate diverse audiences about Emily Dickinson's life, family, creative work, times and enduring relevance, and to preserve and interpret the Homestead and The Evergreens as historical resources for the benefit of scholars and the general public." The museum offers creative tours that present the story of Emily Dickinson's life as well as dynamic public programming that weaves together poetry, education, and historic preservation. To learn more about the museum and Emily Dickinson, visit: [www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org](http://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org)

Interested in reading Dickinson's poetry? The Emily Dickinson Museum web site offers **Tips for Reading Dickinson's Poetry**. Two of their suggestions, "Stay open to linguistic surprise," and "Try 'filling in the blanks'" are great guides for attempting to read Dickinson's poems. Her poetry is often compact, and the images and language create a sort of dance back and forth, encouraging the reader to read the verses again and again. You often need to read her poems several times before starting to form a concrete interpretation or idea. That's the beauty of Emily Dickinson's poetry: the language surprises you, catches you off guard and invites you to dig deeper, even when there are not that many words to excavate. There are many ideas hidden beneath the surface of her words. One could argue that Dickinson intends for her readers to discover these ideas.

Read **"Hope" is the thing with feathers - (314)** by Emily Dickinson (Google "Hope Feathers Dickinson Poetry Foundation"). A couple of things to notice while you read the poem over a few times: How does Dickinson utilize punctuation and why do you think she places commas and dashes where she has inserted them? What effect does it have on the way you read the poem? How does Dickinson create a play of images to convey single concepts or ideas? Notice how, through Dickinson's various images that personify "hope," the concept of hope suddenly becomes more complex, rich, intriguing and even mysterious. This is the beauty of Dickinson's poetry.

### **Elizabeth Porter Phelps (1747-1817) & Sarah Snell (1802-1824)**

In her book ***Our Own Snug Fireside: Images of the New England Home, 1760-1860*** author Jane Nylander looks at two women who lived in Western Massachusetts to demonstrate the domestic life of women in New England during the 18th and 19th centuries. **Elizabeth Porter Phelps** (Hadley) and **Sarah Snell** (Cummington) are two local women whose diaries and family papers have lent themselves to helping historians, such as Nylander, to construct more complete narratives of women's lives in early New England. Sarah Snell was William Cullen Bryant's mother. She raised her family in a two story colonial house which is now a part of the Victorian home that makes up the **William Cullen Bryant Homestead** in Cummington, MA. A property of The Trustees, this historic site houses Sarah Snell's diary from 1794 during the house's tour season. This diary, as well as the Snells' other diaries (currently at Harvard), detail her daily activity thereby providing a picture of the life of a woman running a small homestead in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. At the house, visitors can learn about Snell and see her portrait hanging in the historic home as well as see the original floorboards and the house in which Snell raised her family.

In Hadley, the **Porter-Phelps-Huntington Museum**, constructed in 1752, contains a rich collection of objects. The family's papers, diaries, and important documents are now housed at Amherst College's Archives and Special Collections. The house is open May-October for house tours and special events such as community days and teas. Interestingly, the house was owned by three generations of women in the 18th and 19th centuries. Elizabeth Porter left the house to her daughter Elizabeth Phelps and Phelps passed it to her daughter Elizabeth Huntington. It was 103 years after it was built that the home was given to a son!

### **Juanita Nelson (1923-2015)**

**Juanita Nelson** was an American social activist who made her home in Deerfield, MA. In 1948 she co-founded the Peacemakers, a group of pacifists that advocated non-violent action against war through tax resistance. Additionally, Nelson worked on desegregation campaigns and was an organizer for the Congress of Racial Equality. She also participated in early sit-ins during the Civil Rights Movement while a student studying at Howard University. In her later years, Nelson and her husband chose to live on a reduced-income as a form of peaceful tax resistance. As supporters of local food and agriculture, they built their own home in Deerfield, MA and grew most of their own food.

Nelson was arrested several times for tax resistance and civil rights protests during the 1960's and 1970's. In 1974, she and her husband, Wally, practiced organic farming at **Woolman Hill** in Deerfield, MA, where they received a small plot of land, built a small home with no running water, and lived a frugal and consciously simple life as a form of peaceful protest.

In 1980, Nelson told The Recorder, "If you believe in something, it's forever. If you can't build on what you've done before, you're not getting anyplace...Your life is your action."

Nelson and her husband Wally were responsible for helping to found the **Pioneer Valley Tax Resisters** and the **Valley Community Land Trust**, as well as the **Greenfield Farmers' Market** and the **Greenfield Free Harvest Supper**. Visit these events to see how belief in your actions to bring about social change can influence your community.



## Exploring Women's History via Higher Education

Did you know that Western Massachusetts is home to the first women's college in the United States? In 1837 a female seminary was founded by chemist and educator Mary Lyon. This seminary is now **Mount Holyoke College** in South Hadley, MA. The college was founded at a time when women still did not have the right to vote, yet its founder's famous words, "Go where no one else will go, do what no one else will do," certainly inspired young women to think beyond social boundaries in order to achieve, inspire and demonstrate the strength and dynamic voice of women.

Mt. Holyoke is the first of the seven sisters, a group of liberal arts colleges in the Northeast that were started as women's colleges. Some of these schools are still women's colleges today and two of them are here in Western Massachusetts: **Mount Holyoke College** (South Hadley) and **Smith College** (Northampton).



Both of these college campuses are open to the public to enjoy the grounds, peruse the libraries and attend public lectures and events. Each college has an art museum



with rich collections as well as concerts and theatrical performances. Many famous women throughout history have graduated from these institutions. For a complete list of notable alumnae that graduated from Mt. Holyoke College and Smith College, visit the following web pages:

- **Smith College:** [www.smith.edu/about-smith/notable-alumnae](http://www.smith.edu/about-smith/notable-alumnae)
- **Mount Holyoke College:** [www.mtholyoke.edu/about/notable/alumnae-changemakers](http://www.mtholyoke.edu/about/notable/alumnae-changemakers)

## International Women's Day

**International Women's Day** takes place every year on March 8th. This day celebrates and respects women, their lives, achievements, work and presence in the world. Did you know that in Italy, International Women's Day is celebrated with the Mimosa Blossom? On Women's Day, or La Festa della Donna, women are gifted with the mimosa blossom as a symbol of appreciation, love and respect for women.

Locally, International Women's Day is celebrated annually in Northampton, MA, during the **Celebration of Speech**. The Celebration of Speech program features performances, contemporary speeches, and historic speeches. This community-based learning opportunity honors influential women throughout history and some of the amazing women that live right here in Western Massachusetts today.

### Think about this:

Throughout history, women have been an integral part of the art world. As patrons, historians, innovators, critics, and creators, their contributions are widespread. Why is it that they are underrepresented in art history?

When art history is considered, what media come to mind? How about textile arts? Culinary arts? Decorative arts? Are these considered fine art?

How have gender biases influenced our art history narrative?

How have women generated social change throughout history? How do they now use visual art and language art to address contemporary issues?

Springtime is filled with sightings of all kinds of exciting natural wonders. The season's outdoor appeal makes it a perfect time of year not only for enjoying our natural surroundings, but for learning about conservation and species preservation, too!

In particular, springtime is the season for bird sightings as Western Massachusetts becomes filled with a variety of migrating **bird species** in the early spring months.

Species to look for in the spring include Baltimore Orioles, Eastern Bluebirds, Eastern Whip-Poor-Wills, American Kestrels, Indigo Buntings, Cedar Waxwings, American Robins, Carolina Wrens, American Goldfinches, Great Blue Herons, Red-winged Blackbirds, and many others! Knowing the names of the birds we share our home with and being able to identify them by their songs and behavior helps us connect to the seasons and strengthens our sense of place.

**Mass Audubon's website** ([www.massaudubon.org](http://www.massaudubon.org)) has a comprehensive list to support an interest in ornithology. Visit local sanctuaries, including **Arcadia Wildlife Sanctuary** in Easthampton, home to a rookery with over 50 **blue heron nests** and **nesting bald eagles**.

Download a **bird checklist** on the Mass Audubon website to bring with you on your birding excursions during every season to keep track of your various bird sightings. Afterwards, you can be a citizen scientist and submit your sightings to Mass Audubon's **eBird** page in collaboration with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology to help them understand the population distribution at their properties!

## Spring Birds Food History, Celebrations, Art & Poetry



Indigo Bunting in W. Chesterfield, MA  
Photo Credit: Sienna Wildfield



Robin Nest in W. Chesterfield, MA  
Photo Credit: Sienna Wildfield

## Birding: Musings on Nature through Poetry & Place

The bird populations in Western Massachusetts have inspired many poets and writers to pick up their pens and compose verses dedicated to our feathered friends, celebrating nature and the land. Cummington native **William Cullen Bryant**, and Amherst native **Emily Dickinson**, both wrote poems about the bobolink. This intriguing species migrates back to New England in the late Spring (mid-late May) where it prefers large grasslands, such as hay fields, where they can build their nests on the ground. They are impressive birds, with a curious and clownish fluttering that is a joy to see in the late spring and early summer. Due to their preference to nest in hay fields often utilized by farmers, **The Bobolink Project ([www.bobolinkproject.com](http://www.bobolinkproject.com))** seeks to work with farmers to delay haying fields in order to protect grassland birds such as bobolinks.

Learn about bobolinks through the **Cornell Lab of Ornithology's website** and their educational videos on different bird species at **[www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Bobolink/lifehistory](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Bobolink/lifehistory)**.

## William Cullen Bryant

After learning about their habitat, migration patterns, behavior and nesting preferences, read Bryant's poem **Robert of Lincoln** (Google "Robert Lincoln William Cullen Bryant"). The poem is a sweet description of the bird. Notice how different the description of the bobolink is in poetic form as opposed to a scientist's observations. Bryant's verses decoratively describe the bobolink in a fun and lighthearted way. From this poem, you can gather what type of habitat the bird lives in, as well as a description of the bird's plumage ("wearing a bright black wedding-coat;/White are his shoulders, and white his crest;"). Bryant also mentions the bobolink's song ("hear him call in his merry note:/ Bob-o'-link, bob-o'-link")

You can still visit the William Cullen Bryant Homestead in Cummington, MA, and roam the same fields where Bryant most certainly witnessed the nesting of bobolinks as a young man and later as an elderly poet when he purchased the property back in 1865.

**William Cullen Bryant Homestead** in Cummington, MA

[www.thetrustees.org/places-to-visit/pioneer-valley/bryant-homestead.html](http://www.thetrustees.org/places-to-visit/pioneer-valley/bryant-homestead.html)

## Emily Dickinson

Another local poet inspired by this curious bird was Amherst poet Emily Dickinson. Her poem **The Way to know the Bobolink** describes the bird's personality and characteristics in a beautiful and insightfully complex way (Google "Bobolink Dickinson"). Read Dickinson's poem closely and notice how precisely she chooses her words to pay tribute to this typical Western Massachusetts visitor. Note her description of the bird's "attire" and personality as "too intimate with Joy." Why do you think Dickinson describes the bobolink this way? What about the bird's flight pattern or characteristics offer the poet interesting details to compose a more poetic rendering of the species?



# Investigating Nature at Home: Birds in Your Backyard

## Land Trust: Supporting Community & Local Wildlife

There are many local organizations in Western Massachusetts that support species habitat and nesting opportunities for birds. **Kestrel Land Trust**, based in Amherst, MA, offers a unique volunteer opportunity to be a **Kestrel Nest Box Monitor**. Nest Box Monitors visit the Kestrel nest boxes regularly to keep track of their use during the breeding season starting in late March. It's a chance to learn more about kestrels and their nesting patterns, and to observe these beautiful birds of prey locally in Western MA.

Visit [www.kestrreltrust.org](http://www.kestrreltrust.org) to learn more information about volunteering at Kestrel Land Trust as a Nest Box Monitor.

## Bird Feeders: Supporting Language Arts

What better way to learn more about birds in early spring than in your own **backyard!** Like Bryant and Dickinson, you can observe the birds that frequent your backyard feeder and later reflect on their characteristics to write interesting and poetic descriptions that utilize **metaphors** and **similes** to convey the bird's behavior through creative language. If you don't yet have a **bird feeder**, building one can be a **self-initiated project** that may include a variety of skills including math, architecture, woodworking and the decorative arts. You can continue to use your bird feeder throughout the winter months by keeping it stocked for those birds that don't migrate. This will help birds have a source of food during the year's coldest season. As a result, you can continue to watch birds in your backyard and gain a better sense of Western Massachusetts' bird populations and the species with whom you share



Nesting Box Support Many Species  
Photo Credit: Sienna Wildfield



your natural surroundings. Perhaps you'll begin to feel inspired similarly to Bryant and Dickinson!

### **WebCam: Local Legends, Local Birds**

In 2003, a pair of **Peregrine Falcons** built a nest on the roof of the **University of Massachusetts DuBois Library** and, 37 chicks later, the nest is still used by a pair of Peregrine Falcons each year. As a result, UMass Amherst installed a **webcam** so the public can watch the nest, see when the chicks hatch in April and learn more about Peregrine chicks, nesting behaviors, and fledglings. It's a rare opportunity to witness wildlife up close! The **DuBois Library Falcons** have become well-known; Viewers wait each spring for the webcam's live stream to be up and running and for the chicks to hatch. You can visit the webcam's stream at [www.library.umass.edu/falcons](http://www.library.umass.edu/falcons).

### **Falconry: Ancient Art, Local Species.**

Interested in interacting with birds more directly? How about falconry? **Falconry** is an ancient form of hunting that utilizes a trained bird of prey to gather food. It dates back to 1300 B.C.E. and has been practiced for centuries all over the world. Although there are records of falconry in the 1600's in New England, it was not a common practice until the 20th century with Colonel R. L. "Luff" Meredith, who is considered the father of American falconry. In a New Yorker interview from 1938, Meredith said, "a hawk can be trained in six weeks, but it takes three years to make a falconer." The traditional bird used by falconers in the U.S. is a Peregrine - the same falcon you can watch on the UMass webcam in the spring!

If you're interested in learning the art of falconry you can visit **New England Falconry** in Hadley, MA. For those interested in becoming falconers, New England Falconry offers private classes to learn the art of falconry.

### **Think about this:**

From song birds in the spring to crows in the autumn, how do birds mark the seasons for you? How do their songs and calls connect you to where you live?

Compare and contrast wild birds with domesticated poultry. From the food we eat to the sounds outside our windows, there is a relationship between birds, habitat and culture. How are they integrated and how do they impact each other?



Spring Trail in Western MA  
Photo Credit: Sienna Wildfield





**The  
William Cullen Bryant  
Homestead**

**CUMMINGTON, MA**



**Celebrating  
Women's  
History in  
March**



**NEW ENGLAND  
AIR MUSEUM**

**Annual Women Take Flight Celebration  
at New England Air Museum  
NEAM.ORG 860-623-3305**



**MA Sheep & Woolcraft Fair in Cummington**  
Photo Credit: Sienna Wildfield



# April

## Poetry Month: Local Trails, Poets & National Observation Day

Western Massachusetts has been home to many poets and writers who were inspired by this region's remarkable landscape. April is **National Poetry Month**. As nature begins to come to life in blossoms and buds, National Poetry Month is the perfect catalyst for exploring the outdoor spaces and places that inspired great writers of the past and present through some of the many local trails found in the region.

The **Rivulet Trail** at the **William Cullen Bryant Homestead** is a hiking trail accessible to the public in Cummington, MA. The path along the rivulet is the same trail that once inspired Bryant to write *The Rivulet*. You can still hike this trail at The Trustees' property and encounter the poem posted along the trail to read and reflect on this beautiful place that features old growth forest and some of the tallest stands of White Pine in the Northeast. It's a sacred space that may compel you to write a few verses of your own! Read Bryant's poem ahead of time (Google "Rivulet William Cullen Bryant"), then read it again while hiking the trail. How does the integration of language arts and nature influence your connection to place and poetry?

The **Robert Frost Trail** is named after poet Robert Frost. It's a 47 mile trail in the Pioneer Valley that passes through ten towns along the Connecticut River. Different sections of the trail take hikers through diverse terrain and landscapes. (Google "Robert Frost Trail Guide" to find the map online.) Before heading out, read some of Robert Frost's poetry for inspiration. How about his well-known poem, *The Road Not Taken*? A poem often read at an early age in elementary school, *The Road Not Taken* addresses the idea of choice and the effects that choosing one path over another have in making an impact on the outcome.

Reflect on the last stanza of *The Road Not Taken*. Now read Bryant's *The Rivulet*. How do both poets use nature as a way to ask insightful questions regarding the complexities of life? In Frost's poem, the poet realizes that not every path can be taken, yet the one you choose is the one that affects your life the most profoundly. In Bryant's poem, the poet reflects on growing old and recognizes that while he continues to grow and change, the rivulet and the woods seem to remain forever unchanged and ever present. The imagery of nature in both poems is used to

demonstrate philosophical concepts that the poets are trying to grasp and comprehend. Both are inspired by nature's teachings.

**Monument Mountain** in Great Barrington, MA, has a hiking trail that inspired one of the greatest American novels, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. In 1858, young writers Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville hiked up Monument Mountain to feel inspired, to encourage creativity, and converse with one another. They read another local writer's poem, *Monument Mountain*, by William Cullen Bryant. When a storm approached and they took cover, it is said that their conversation and the profile of **Mt. Greylock** in the distance sparked Melville's original idea for his great sea novel. The profile of Mt. Greylock reminded him of a great whale. Read the same poem Melville and Hawthorne read atop Monument Mountain by William Cullen Bryant and then again on this trail, reflecting on the power of poetry in our connection to place.

For a list of more trails that have influenced the writings of Western Massachusetts authors, poets, and artists, download the map of **Amherst Literary Trails** at [www.amherstma.gov](http://www.amherstma.gov). Featured in this trail map are trails that influenced the work of **Emily Dickinson, Bob McClung, and Joseph Langland**.

### **Celebrating National Poetry Month: Poem in Your Pocket Day**

In celebration of National Poetry Month, **Poem in Your Pocket Day** is an annual day for people to celebrate the inspiring nature of poetry by selecting a poem and carrying it in their pocket for sharing with others throughout the day. Originally started in 2002, this annual day is a way for folks to share a common love for the written word in poetic verse. To join the celebration, search "**Poem In Your Pocket**" at [www.poets.org](http://www.poets.org).

To discover poetry by writers from the region, consider carrying a poem written by a local poet from Western Massachusetts. Here are a few poets that inspire our region with their words:

- Former Poet Laureate **Richard Wilbur** is a Cummington, MA, resident. Read Wilbur's poem *The Beautiful Changes* at [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org).
- Ashfield, MA, resident, **Jan Freeman** is author of *Blue Calypso* and founder of Paris Press. Read Freeman's poem *Like a Curtain* at [www.poets.org](http://www.poets.org).
- **Holly Wren Spaulding** is a Williamsburg, MA, resident and author of *Pilgrim*. Read her poem, *Sometimes, the Field* at [poemelf.com](http://poemelf.com).

## Spring Holidays: Culture, Visual Art & Food Traditions

The reemergence of flora and fauna in the outdoor world gives cause for celebration as the months turn warmer and new life abounds. For many, it is a time of celebration linked to spring's seasonality as reflected in the types of food prepared in holiday celebrations, including Easter and Passover.

### Easter

A Christian holiday, **Easter** celebrates the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It is celebrated at the end of **Lent**, a solemn and religious observance that includes prayer, penance, and fasting. Generally, those who observe Lent give up something as a form of penance and reflection. Once Easter arrives, however, Lent ends and a joyful holiday feast is prepared. Interestingly, many of the traditions associated with Easter in contemporary culture are not Christian in origin, but rather Pagan.



Easter Egg Hunts in Western MA

Photo Credit: Sienna Wildfield



Some say the word Easter derives from the Pagan **Ēostre**, the Teutonic (Germanic/Nordic) goddess of spring and fertility. However, in romance languages such as Spanish (Pascua), Italian (Pasqua) and French (Paques) the word for Easter derives from the Latin (Pascha) meaning **Passover**, referring to the Jewish festival commemorating the ancient Israelites' exodus from slavery in Egypt.

Although Easter and its celebrations are now deeply rooted in Christian liturgy and practice, some of the commercial aspects of the holiday are borrowed from ancient Pagan rituals. One example is the presence of the **Easter bunny**. The rabbit was a symbol associated with the Norse goddess **Ēostre**. It has now carried over into the celebration of Easter as a sign of rebirth and new life. Similarly, the **Easter egg** had a long history as a symbol of new life and rebirth in the Christian tradition. Easter eggs are often decorated with dyes or paints. The practice of painting the eggs varies among the cultures that celebrate the Christian holiday of Easter.

The Italian neighborhood located in the **South End of Springfield**, MA, features many Italian-American bakeries, restaurants, and eateries where you can explore the food and culture brought over by Italian immigrants to Western Massachusetts. Specifically, adventurous eaters can try a delicious wheat pie made in celebration of Easter in Southern Italy called **La Pastiera**. **La Fiorentina Bakery** in Springfield prepares this Neapolitan wheat pie/tart only during the Easter season. It is certainly a treat to try while visiting this neighborhood of Springfield.

This sweet pie is made of wheat, egg, and ricotta cheese flavored with orange blossom water. The pie is usually prepared days in advance to allow the perfume of the orange blossom water and the other flavors to blend together, creating a wonderful aroma and delicious taste. The pie utilizes food items that would be available in the spring, including stored grain, eggs, and cheese. Interested in trying your hand at making la pastiera? Try out this **recipe** at [michelescicolone.com/pastiera-di-grano](http://michelescicolone.com/pastiera-di-grano).

## Passover

**Passover** is an important Jewish holiday that commemorates when the ancient Israelites fled Egypt and were liberated from slavery. The holiday is celebrated today as a gathering on the first night of Passover for a special dinner called a **seder**. An important part of this gathering and meal is the retelling of the story of the exodus from Egypt. It is a moment to reflect on history, celebrate liberation, and study together. The story is told from the special text called the **Haggadah** and includes all generations of the family, young and old.

The ceremonial **Seder Plate** includes various symbols:

- **Zeroa (Shankbone):** A piece of roasted meat to symbolize the special sacrificial lamb on the night of the exodus.
- **Beitzah (Egg):** An egg represents new beginnings and rebirth .
- **Maror and Chazeret (Bitter Herbs):** The bitterness of the herbs is a reminder of the bitterness endured during slavery.
- **Charoset (Paste):** A mixture of apples, pears, nuts and wine which resembles the mortar and brick made by the enslaved Jews in Egypt.
- **Karpas (Vegetable):** Typically, parsley is used and refers to springtime. When dipped in salt water, it symbolizes the harsh and difficult work the Jews endured during slavery.

**Marc Chagall's Passover Haggadah:** Russian French artist Marc Chagall has been referred to as "the quintessential Jewish artist of the twentieth century." Chagall moved from Russia to Paris in 1910 when he was a young man to continue his art education. He became friends with other avant-garde artists and established a unique style of painting haunted by ephemeral and ghostly figures that appear mystical and surreal. During the Nazi occupation in France, Chagall and his family took refuge in the United States where he stayed until after World War II. He returned to France in 1948.

Chagall was a prolific and accomplished painter who mastered many art techniques including engraving and stained glass. His works contain a dream-like and sometimes melancholic quality. They use complex metaphors and visual themes that address culture, religion, current events, and identity. One of his works is the illustrated **Passover Haggadah**. This text read during the Passover Seder contains colorful illustrations by the artist with images in Chagall's quintessential color palette to illustrate the Israelites exodus from Egypt.

Learn more about Marc Chagall and his artwork by exploring the Guggenheim's online digital collection of Chagall's work at [www.guggenheim.org](http://www.guggenheim.org).

## Earth Day: Ecopoetry, Resources & Annual Events

Each year, **Earth Day** takes place on April 22nd. Known as the birth of the modern environmental movement, Earth Day was first celebrated in 1970 and continues as a way to demonstrate support for environmental protection. Western Massachusetts is host to many secular celebrations and festivals that honor the commitment to sustainable and resilient living, giving the community many ways to come together to engage on Earth Day

through service-based learning opportunities, eco-workshops, and local gatherings.

Since National Poetry Month and Earth Day share the same season and month, it seems appropriate to mention **Ecopoetry**, a movement of poetry with a strong environmental ethic that acknowledges the relationship between humans and nature. Poetry has the power to reveal insight and to spark curiosity and inquiry. Ecopoetry is a way to reflect on our relationship with the Earth during Earth Day and develop a heightened awareness of how we directly interact with nature in our local Western Massachusetts communities.

In our region, we are also reminded of writers and painters such as **William Cullen Bryant** and **Thomas Cole** who helped shape an early American ecological ethic and appreciation for nature through their portrayal of the natural world in their works. Their championing of the American landscape, both pastoral and wild, contributed to the shaping of a unique American identity associated with the environment and sense of place. Thanks to



Photo Credit: Sienna Wildfield



them and other pioneers of the public parks and landscape movement in the 19th century, conservation organizations such as **The Trustees of Reservations** were founded. Massachusetts is home to many land trusts that work locally to protect the land that identifies our cultural and regional identities. On Earth Day, celebrate the land that shares with us beauty, inspiration, food, clean air, clean water, and refuge.

Discover poets that write about nature from an ecological perspective and ethic:

- Alice Oswald: ***The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet*** and ***Full-Length Portrait of the Moon*** ([www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org))
- Jay Ramsay & Carole Bruce: ***The White Poem***

To discover more ecopoetry, peruse online journal *Written River* ([writtenriver.com](http://writtenriver.com)) and explore ecopoetics of contemporary poets.

## Community Resources and Annual Events for Sustainable Living



Festival in Franklin County  
Photo Credit: Sienna Wildfield

### Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA)

CISA is a Western Massachusetts organization that "strengthens farms and engages the community to build the local food economy." CISA connects community members with the **farms** and **farmers** that produce food in our region to help ensure food security and fortify the relationship between the land and our dinner tables. CISA offers many workshops and community events to provide folks with the opportunity to learn more about sustainable agriculture such as winter vegetable cultivation, homestead woodlot management, farm financing, making the most out of pasture and hayfields, maple sugaring at home

and many other subjects throughout the year! CISA's website also connects you to nearby farms where you can source your food as well as find resources and recipes. Consider **volunteering** with CISA in celebration of Earth Day and sustainable agriculture! Learn more about their volunteer opportunities at [www.buylocalfood.org](http://www.buylocalfood.org).

## **Local Ecological Art**

Local Williamsburg artist **Todd Lynch** creates ecological art installations throughout Western Massachusetts communities at different natural sites to help foster a dialogue between people and the landscape. One of his installations, the Flotsam Weirs Installation, utilized woven fences made of material found on-site to create an environmental sculpture that helped people learn about hydrology and ecology as well as how structures in the natural world decay throughout time. The piece is a way to witness the process of nature and to understand the beauty of its ecology through an artistic lens. It is located in Williamsburg, MA. Pictures are found at [www.ecotropy.net](http://www.ecotropy.net).

## **Seed Swaps**

**Seed swaps** are a chance for community members to meet one another, gather together and share gardening tips, ideas, and, more importantly, seeds! Many local libraries in the Hilltowns and Pioneer Valley host seed swaps in early spring to encourage togetherness, sharing and collaborative consumption by providing the space for people to get together and share the food and plants they grow. Check out local libraries for nearby seed swaps and visit [www.HilltownFamilies.org](http://www.HilltownFamilies.org) for embedded learning in **seed saving**.

## **Amherst Sustainability Festival**

Every year, the town of Amherst celebrates Earth Day with an annual **Sustainability Festival**. Usually during the week of Earth Day, this festival includes performances on the town common, workshops to learn more about how to live more sustainably at home, family entertainment, and local farm animals from the 4-H club! You can find out about the Sustainability Festival at [www.amherstma.gov](http://www.amherstma.gov).

## **Earth Day at UMass**

The University of Massachusetts celebrates with an Earth Day Festival every year with student groups that host booths, a farmers' market featuring student grown produce, live music, and art activities. Each year is different, so best to check the UMass website to see what is on the schedule for this year's Earth Day Festival at UMass.

## Shearing Season: History, Fiber Arts & Community Traditions

In the 19th century, Western Massachusetts saw a huge merino sheep boom when many farms purchased Australian sheep for their incredibly soft fleece to produce wool for textiles. The Hilltowns' landscape provided ideal pasture for livestock grazing.

Although this craze for merino wool did not last long, and some of the farms no longer exist, there is still a rich and long tradition of fiber farms in Western Massachusetts that

continue to produce fiber and yarn for hand knitters and textile artists.

The benefit of purchasing local yarn is that you are more involved in and aware of the entire process of producing your wool. Unlike commercially produced yarn, which is often processed and shipped from overseas, local yarn speaks to the land and farmers that cared for the sheep and cultivated the land. Often, the wool is processed locally and requires many hands to create it: from the farmer that cares for the

animals, to the sheep shearer, spinners and hand-dyers, locally grown yarn offers the hand knitter a deeper connection to our community's agricultural roots. It also supports the local economy and helps foster collaboration and sustainable consumption.

A few local independent shops to help you with your knitting adventures:

### Sheep to Shawl

Sheep to Shawl in Deerfield, MA, hosts a variety of public workshops, talks, and events centered around fiber arts and knitting. Sheep to Shawl also carries a variety of local yarns produced in the Pioneer Valley and Northern Berkshires, offering knitters a great introduction to yarns from our region. [sheepandshawl.com](http://sheepandshawl.com)



Sheep Grazing in Buckland, MA  
Photo Credit: Sienna Wildfield



## Northampton Wools

Located in Northampton, MA, Northampton Wools is an independent yarn store that offers knitting classes for both experienced and beginner knitters.

[www.northamptonwools.com](http://www.northamptonwools.com)

## Sheep Shearing

Sheep shearing is a laborious process and requires practice and skill. Historically, it was practiced with blade shears that look much like large scissors. Today, shearing is done with different blades powered by electricity, making the process more efficient. Almost all sheep require shearing since sheep do not go through a typical shedding cycle like most animals. It's important to shear their fleece before the warmer months to prevent overheating. The fleece from shearing is what knitters and fiber artists utilize to produce yarn. Spring is the most common time of year to shear.

For fiber farmers, shearing once a year allows for longer fibers, and therefore higher quality yarn. Farmers contact local shearers once a year to shear their flocks. As mentioned above, learning to shear is a skill that takes time and practice. To learn more about shearing, visit the University of Massachusetts' website: [ag.umass.edu](http://ag.umass.edu).



Sheep Shearing in Cummington, MA

Photo Credit: Sienna Wildfield

## Fiber Festivals

There are many festivals and wool celebrations that take place in New England throughout the year. Here are a few where you can learn more about raising sheep, fiber production and processing:

### **Sheep to Shawl Festival (Williamstown, MA)**

Late April or early May and held at the Williamstown Rural Lands Foundation. [wrlf.org](http://wrlf.org)

### **Wool Days at Old Sturbridge Village (Sturbridge, MA)**

Usually in late May. An opportunity to explore how New Englanders raised sheep for their wool in the 1830's. The entire textile process is displayed as it would have been done in the 19th century. [www.osv.org](http://www.osv.org)

### **Massachusetts Sheep & Woolcraft Fair (Cummington, MA)**

Held in late May at the Cummington Fairgrounds, this fair includes sheep judging, dog trials, fleece auctions, craft vendors and fiber animals. [www.masheepwool.org](http://www.masheepwool.org)



Fiber Festival in Cummington, MA  
Photo Credit: Sienna Wildfield

## **ABOUT HILLTOWN FAMILIES**

Who am I? Where am I? These are the fundamental questions proposed by the humanities. Inquiries related to local history, literature, and education inspire us to think deeply about the places where we live and how our identity fits into the context of our communities and the seasons.

Hilltown Families' mission is to support the common good of our community through the development of a sense of place by a shared understanding in the value of self-directed learning through community engagement. These learning values are referred to as "community-based education" and are accessible and inclusive to an intergenerational audience. This process of learning unites community members through shared interests, establishes a shared history, and deepens a connection to place.

Hilltown Families believes in creating resilient and sustainable communities by developing and strengthening a sense of place in our children and citizens through community-based education and engagement. Established in 2005 by Sienna Wildfield, Hilltown Families identifies, curates, and shares community-based learning opportunities that reflect back to the community its potential while impacting the culture. Community members of all ages are encouraged to engage in repeating social and environmental patterns that support interests, building upon seasonal cycles to support learning found in the intersections of food, habitat, and culture within community resources, events, and opportunities.

Funded in part by Mass Humanities, *Learning Ahead: Cultural Itinerary for Western Massachusetts* is a bimonthly publication produced by Hilltown Families that sheds light on embedded learning opportunities found in cultural resources that exist within the geography, history, and cultural traditions of the Hilltowns and surrounding area.

With these seasonal itineraries, self-directed teens, lifelong learners and families are encouraged to engage together in cultural opportunities that support similar interests, resulting in a shared history and a strengthened sense of place.

By emphasizing place-based exploration through humanities inquiry, these cultural itineraries connect residents of all ages to their place, helping to shape a more comprehensive understanding of our cultural identity, heritage, and history. This contributes to establishing meaningful relationships between young people, elders, and more active citizens.

Hilltown Families is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization. [www.HilltownFamilies.org](http://www.HilltownFamilies.org)



 **HilltownFamilies.org**  
COMMUNITY-BASED EDUCATION NETWORK