By our upside-down European calendar, spring starts in September. But look carefully at your backyard or street, and you’ll see changes before then.

In Victoria, keep your eyes open for the flowering of silver wattles. The bright yellow flowers, which usually bloom in August, mark the coming of Guling or orchid season.

“Guling is nearly there,” says John Patten, from Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre at the Melbourne Museum. “We’ve already come through the highest rainfall and we’re in the lowest temperatures.” Mr Patten is showing me a display in the museum’s forest enclosure, which describes seven different seasons understood by the Kulin people—the five Aboriginal nations in the area we know as Melbourne and central Victoria.

The Kulin calendar, like all Aboriginal seasonal knowledge, is defined by the interactions of plants, animals and weather, as well as the length of the days and the movement of the stars.

The cold, wet time of year—Waring or wombat season—lasts from April until July. Days are short and nights long and wombats emerge to bask and graze when it is sunny.

Next, around August, orchid season lasts only a month. Wattles bloom, orchids flower and, at night, male koalas belch and the caterpillars of the common brown butterfly feed on grass. Then, in September and October, Pooneet or tadpole season arrives, in which days and nights are of equal length and the pied currawongs call loudly and often.

Mr Patten is a Yorta Yorta (north-east Victoria) and Bundjulang (northern New South Wales) man. He says it’s important to recognise that the traditional seasons vary greatly between places.

“Signs of the seasons”

JULY-BUDDING WATTLE AND BELLLOWING KOALAS REVEAL THE CHANGE IN THE WEATHER.

For example, non-indigenous audiences understand that we have wet and dry seasons in the Top End, but some groups up there identify with a calendar of six or even 12 different seasons.

The Kulin calendar at the museum is a modern interpretation, pieced together by Koori people and academics. “The records for the seasons in Victoria are incomplete. We have records that suggest there were five, six or seven seasons. It was in flux, because people were reacting to what was happening around them,” he says.

As well as yearly cycles, the Kulin people observed a regular fire season, every seven years on average, and a flood season, every 28 years.

Also in the museum’s forest enclosure, just a few metres from the exhibit on the Kulin seasons, stands the chimney of a homestead burnt down in the Black Saturday bushfires. Traditional knowledge helps us understand and stay prepared for natural disasters. Mr Patten says, noting that many of our cities and towns have been built on flood plains or in bushfire zones. “A lot of people don’t appreciate the complexity in the way this continent works.”

The science of the timing of natural cycles is called phenology. As temperatures rise and weather patterns shift due to climate change, these cycles are moving.

In 2010, a study showed that a one-degree increase in Melbourne’s temperature had led to the common brown butterfly emerging from its cocoon 10 days earlier than it did mid last-century. That’s significant because mismatches with other species could have cascading effects in the ecosystem.

Citizens can help scientists understand what’s happening by taking part in ClimateWatch, a website where participants monitor and record the behaviour of birds, plants and insects.

michaelgreen.com.au

LINKS
museum.victoria.com.au/forest/climate/kulin.html
bom.gov.au/ikw
climatewatch.org.au