



# CENTER LINE

A Publication of Waukesha County's Retzer Nature Center

## Spring 2011

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### Upcoming Events:

- ◆ Aldo Leopold Weekend Saturday, March 5
- ◆ Morning Bird Hikes Fridays in April, May & June
- ◆ Earth Week Activities April 17-23
- ◆ Spring Plant Sale May 7

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## PUT A SPRING IN YOUR STEPS

Cold months of winter drifted between the snows, never ending, or so it seemed. Before winter's cabin fever became terminal, however, the calendar flipped over into March exposing its magic number, the 20<sup>th</sup>, to be exact – the first day of spring. Hallelujah, nature's celebration already in the making. Frank Lloyd Wright once said, "Study nature, love nature, stay close to nature. It will never fail you." Spring is the time to renew study and be close to nature. Spring is a time to explore the trails of the splurging flora of early blooms.

With the entrance of spring, delicate pink-lavender flowers that catch the eye along roadsides, or in prairies, are Wild Geranium, *Geranium maculatum*. The five-petaled blooms become 1-1 ½ inch flowers. There are two to four flowers on forked stalks which will wave above a pair of large lobed leaves. The Wild Geraniums appear to be so delicate, waving in the spring breezes. In fact, however, they are rugged plants with a main underground stem, or rhizome. Their name comes from the Greek work "geranos" which translates Cranes Bill, which in turn becomes their common name. Makes one wonder, how the heck does that compute? But if you look at the plant after flowering, and its seed capsule has split open and spit out the seeds at maturity, you will find that what remains of the capsule is pointed and in the shape of a crane's bill. It is of interest to know that the seeds of the delicate plant can be expelled with enough force to shoot them many feet away. The catapulted seeds can reach a distance of 22 feet. A good tail wind was not mentioned to accomplish this feat, so the Cranesbills are remarkable champions of seed splitting!

These are tiny 6 inch plants that are sometimes called "the footprints of Spring." Other times they may be mentioned as the jewels of the prairie. In early spring, the gutsy flowers can be found along roadsides, in meadows and woodlands; also in oak savannas.



They will pop up along the streams and wander through the tallgrass regions of the state. Just amble along a good outdoor trail in early spring, and you will probably discover *Viola pedata* (Bird's Foot Violet), and you will be better off for it. There are at least 100 species of violet to be found in the United States. All violets have five petals—two at the top, two at the side (wings), and a low petal that can serve as a landing place for insects. *Viola pedata* petals range in colors of lavender to deep purple shades, and this is the only violet that has deeply segmented leaves which resemble the tracks of a bird's foot. The flower has five large, bright-orange stamens in the center. It becomes a beauty in all its spring glory. The Bird's Foot Violet is not a shrinking violet either. It will form bold showy clumps along dry roadsides and in poor sandy areas. Many consider the Bird's Foot Violet to be the most beautiful of all the violets. I'm in that crowd.

There are angel white flowers to be found on the trail in an early spring scene. They are the flowers of the Bloodroot, *Sanguinaria canadensis*. The flowers open wide on bright sunny days, then close at night to escape spring's chilly weather. The 1 ½ inch flower unfurls to display eight to ten petals, doing so daily for about a week. Scalloped leaves surrounding the radiant flowers continue to grow, and they will linger long after the blooms

have faded. One can find their open patches well into summer. Radiant white flowers wear golden centers. Each flower stands stately on a single stem, enfolded in a blue-green leaf. Sanguinaria, which means bleeding, refers to the orange-red juice in the stem and root, which is filled with a red latex. An historical note regarding the Bloodroot: Algonquian Indians called this member of the poppy family Puccoon, because the plant was a source for their dyes. The copious red latex was used to color clothing and baskets. The dye was also applied to face and body as ceremonial ornamentation. Later utilitarian application of the juice was found to be an excellent insect repellent. This fascinating information led me to check on another spring flower, the Hoary Puccoon. Sure enough these Puccoons yield a yellow dye from their root structure, "Puccoon" became the Indian word for any herbal source used in dyes or paints. Red, yellow, and purple dyes from nature's plant material made their daily living more beautiful. Before Frank Lloyd Wright was even on the scene, American Indian cultures were living his three point statement. Study, love, and stay close to nature. Principles in his prairie style were practiced long ago.

If tiny violets are the "footprints of spring", the flowers that bring on the dancing perform in midspring or early summer. There are many native species, and they have a habit of growing in woodlands, bogs, and marshes, although occasionally, you may find them performing in the prairie. As member of royalty, they play where they please. All are members of the Orchid family. Several species can be spotted in our native preserves. One variety of the flower made for dancing is called Large Yellow Lady's Slipper *Cypripedium pubescens*. It can reach 2 ½ feet in stature, and has fine hairy stems and



leaves. Leaves are pleated and parallel-veined. Tips of the leaves are pointed, and can be up to 9 inches long and 5 inches wide. Bases of the leaves clasp the stem. The one to two flowers per stem are perched above an erect leafy bract. The flower shape, however, is what defines the plant. It has a noticeable, inflated cup-shaped yellow petal—the "slipper." On each side of the slipper is a thick

twisted, strap—shaped petal that is around 2 ½ inches long. Two broad sepals arch above and below the slipper. Sepals and lateral petals are yellowish-green to brown. Sometimes they may have purplish-brown spots or streaks. An uncommonly beautiful plant that wears yellow slippers, but bares no feet. The Showy Lady's Slipper, *Cypripedium reginae*, may be spotted in our area, if one gets lucky. The size of the plant is one to three feet tall, and the flower is two to four inches wide.

Flowers with a rose-pink slipper-like lip, and white petals, stand out in their environment. Flowers can be singles or borne in pairs. They posture above leaves clasping the stem. Another strikingly upbeat orchid is the Moccasin Flower, *Cypripedium acaule*. It must be brought to the hiker's attention if spotted in the area... Look for Moccasin Flowers' magenta to white color with a veined slipper like lip at the base of the stem. The Moccasin Flower (or Pink Lady's Slipper) is called stemless, although there is a visible flower stalk above the two base leaves. The leaves grow from an underground stem. You can find this member of the orchid family in the woods, bogs, thickets, and pine barrens.

It could be exciting to run upon Moccasins while tramping along an old Indian trail. An absorbing fact, that has worked wonders for the entire group of *Orchidaceae*, is a fact that deals with pollination. There is no nectar to be found in the slipper-like pouch formed by the lower petal or lip of the orchid, but the structural pouch or slipper has evolved into an intricate insect trap to insure its cross-pollination. Though the flowers have no nectar, the plant will give off a nectar-like scent that will attract the insects. Our beautiful Lady's Slippers become Ladys of deception, and up till now deception has always worked. Insects crawl into the flowers trap. Once inside, the only escape is by squeezing through one of two channels with pollen. Bees can buzz each flower, repeatedly, no meal – but a pollen gratuity is left for the plant. Insects escape to repeat their dance with the slippers, over and over again.

Frank Lloyd Wright got it right when he said: "Study nature, love nature, stay close to nature. It will never fail you."

But enough of repeating. Spring is beckoning, the flora is nodding, and now is the moment to step into spring, and put a spring in your steps.

See you on the trail,

## Shirley Blanchard

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# HEARTWOOD



## High Expectations—the Birds of Spring!

I can't help it. I'm thinking about Spring—the first glimmerings of which (as I write this in January) seem far off indeed. But I can't help it.

I lead a lot of bird hikes in Spring—in fact, I have at least 17 Spring bird hikes currently scheduled for this year, and that number is sure to increase. Yeah, I know...the old stuff about 'a tough job, but someone has to do it'. But really, it is part of my job: to take groups of interested souls out to discover the Birds of Spring!

I have always been a believer in high expectations. High expectations allow us to envision the best outcome, and I believe they help us to achieve the best outcome. High expectations also let us enjoy things more—like the kid counting the days till Santa comes at Christmas; like the kid waiting each day for the mail to come, awaiting that cool thing (whatever it is) that they have sent away for (as I did), or have ordered on-line (as my kids do).

My thoughts of Spring are full of high expectations. After years of seeking out the Birds of Spring, my high expectations resolve themselves into a parade of dramatic appearances, a sequence of staged entrances—the actors appearing in Spring's yearly dramatic production. I can't wait for the parade to start.

The parade at Retzer goes something like this...

- 1—Great Horned Owls—talking eerily to each other in the moonlit pines of January, talking about the eggs that will be in the nest in February, which will hatch into hungry baby owls in March;
- 2—Cardinal—male and female whistling optimistically back and forth to each other, in the tree-tops of February, proclaiming an approaching Spring that few others can see;
- 3—Winter Wren—singing a gorgeous song in the snow-covered Willow forest of late February, flying and running among snow-covered fallen trees, and beneath the Green Trail boardwalk;
- 4—Bald Eagle—passing over the Oaks of late February, bound for the lake country—with a gang of crows flying escort out of their airspace (at a safe distance);
- 5—Red-winged Blackbird—a crowd of them, returning like clock-work across the marshland of the first days of March, announcing their arrival with emphatic calls of "Kong-ga-reee";
- 6—Common Loon—northward flying (fast overhead) toward the lakes of March, searching for a stop-over lake (a lake big enough for the mandatory taxi-run to take-off again!);
- 7—Sandhill Cranes—zenith circling, trumpeting 'welcome-back' flocks, meeting in joyous chaos high over the prairie of March, swirling ever northward;



- 8—Golden-crowned Kinglet—cautiously advancing through the early morning woods of March, little elves among the trees, seeking the earliest insects.

- 9—Eastern Bluebird—returning to the familiar tree cavities and nestboxes of mid-March, to inspect and (eventually) select the season's family quarters;
- 10—American Woodcock—arriving in the fen of late March, males soon beginning their legendary twilight display, their incomparable peenting/whistling/warbling roller coaster of twilight courtship flight;
- 11—Wood Duck—arriving on the late March pond, a palette of eye-popping color against the pre-opened buds of trees and shrubs;
- 12—Eastern Phoebe—tail-tossing, investigating the pond edge of late March, and the shed overhang, for a nest site;
- 13—Killdeer—welcome return to the gravel roadsides and mud flats of late March, running and calling, and flight showing reddish chestnut in the morning sun;

(High Expectations... continued)

- 14—Wild Turkey—toms in the cornfield of early April, displaying impressive fan-tails to impress the hens (who, intent on eating corn, appear to completely ignore them);
- 15—Brown Creeper—wind-up toy on the woodland tree trunks of early April, starting at the bottom of each tree, and hitching in a spiral to the top, seeking insects in the bark crevices;
- 16—Bufflehead—comical little bumblebee of the duck clan, bold and proud on the early April pond;
- 17—Eastern Meadowlark—appearing suddenly on the greening hayfield lawn of early April, a startling gold-and-black reminder of the ancient prairie;
- 18—Northern Shoveler—resting awhile and dabbling on the full stormwater basin of early April, impossibly-big spoon-bill sieving the water;
- 19—White-throated Sparrow—sweet striped singer of the April woods, dreaming of the north country, singing “Oh-sweet-Canada, Canada, Canada”;
- 20—Great Blue Heron—appearing as if by magic at the edge of the flooded April pond, standing still and patient, waiting for a fish or frog to venture too close;
- 21—Turkey Vulture—somerly patrolling once again the April skies, tilting and rolling with the wind, looking for lunch;
- 22—Upland Sandpiper—“back from the Argentine” (to use Leopold’s phrase), returning to the high fields of late April, to re-claim the great domain;
- 23—Rufous-sided Towhee—arriving in the woodland edge of late April, to energetically sing “Drink-your-tee-ee-ee” from a tree-top, or to energetically rummage in the leaves beneath the tree, for hiding insects;
- 24—Brown Thrasher—musical songster and mimic extraordinaire in a tall late-April Oak, repeating each song phrase twice for added enjoyment;
- 25—Palm Warbler—tail-tossing, rusty-headed messenger, exploring the long-grass clumps of late April;
- 26—Bobolink—males back from the South American pampas, song-scouting the prairie and hayfield in the first days of May, dividing up family territories for the soon-to-arrive females;
- 27—Black-throated Green Warbler—woodland 5-note whisperer (“Zee-zee-zee-zoo-zee”) among the leaves begin to emerge in early May;
- 28—Eastern Kingbird—bold sentinel of the early May fields, meeting all intruders with edgy suspicion, on quivering wingtips;
- 29—Indigo Bunting—sapphire canary, crowning the highest branch of the highest woodland edge tree of early May;
- 30—Great Crested Flycatcher—startled voice (“Wheeeep!”) out of the deep woods of early May, reddish-chestnut and yellow in the treetops;
- 31—Blue-gray Gnatcatcher—mini-mockingbird, jumping and flitting in the trees of early May, whining call (“Nyehhh! nyehhh!”) expressing utmost exasperation;
- 32—Dickcissel—chance sighting (here and gone) of this prairie finch at the May Vista, like a mini-meadowlark, recalling the sight and sound of prairies long past;
- 33—Olive-sided Flycatcher—solemn stopover in the open woods of May, white tufts showing above each folded wing;
- 34—Cuckoo—furtively returning to the May orchard, feasting on caterpillars and sneaking (with serpentine flight) between the trees;
- 35—Common Nighthawk—appearing in the May twilight sky, dive-bomber of flies and mosquitoes;



38—Cape May Warbler—a gorgeous vision, tiger-striped and eating May apple blossoms;

- 36—Magnolia Warbler—an occasional (if-we’re-lucky) sighting in the woods of May, often ‘just-over-there’, playing hide and seek with the binoculars;
- 37—Black-throated Blue Warbler—a single glorious sighting, near the May pond-side, back in 1991...but hope springs eternal;
- 38—*see photo box to the left*
- 39—Ruby-throated Hummingbird—unlikely in the May pines, sipping sap, sitting quiet and then buzzing away into the distance;
- 40—Rose-breasted Grosbeak—caroling song enlivens a May Hickory, singer hiding in the leaves, black-and-white and (now and then) a brilliant red;

And the parade continues...

- 41—Red-eyed Vireo—invisible grey-green songster of late May treetops, announcing the approaching summer and singing lazily all summer long, the voice of the leafy woods.

Larry

# The Last Prairie



## True Blue

It's cold as the Earth turns toward the Sun, and twilight becomes dawn. You stand rooted to the spot, soaking up what warmth you can as the light filters through the still bare branches. Why live this far north? This question, asked so many times, is well beyond routine; almost like an old friend, or at least an annoying neighbor. You shiver a little as the wind picks up. It doesn't matter anyway; you are in your 'retirement home'. This is where you're going to stay until you drop dead, but that's a long way off with any luck at all. Yet, it seems harder to wake each spring, even though it's worth the effort. And it is worth it. So many things are happening, and so many creatures coming and going. Some birds are moving through, some are here to stay. The early ephemeral plants race the leaves of more grandiose beings (well, at least taller beings) to gather up enough of the Sun's energy for another year. Many insects are more active, but you do not welcome all of these 'critters' (some of them itch). The mammals are a little less drowsy, and a little more playful; even the human kind. You oversee it all. The sun is a little higher now, and the warmth feels good on the old limbs. If you could smile, you would be grinning now as you look on the rest of the grove. Even with the shorter summers and colder winters, Blue Ash trees do well in Wisconsin; very well indeed.

There are two populations of the State-Threatened Blue Ash (*Fraxinus quadrangulata*) in Wisconsin, both growing in the southeastern part of the state. This is as far north as they grow, with only one exception; they sneak into Canada just north of Lake Erie. I suspect the buffering of this southernmost Great Lake allows them to persist near the northern shore. Closer to home, we are very lucky to have these trees in Muskego Park.

This species of Ash gets its name from the inner bark, which produces a blue dye when extracted by skilled pioneers (Petrides and Wehr 1998). There are less invasive ways to identify it. Like all Ash and Maple trees, the branches and leaves grow opposite one another. Blue Ash have compound leaves, made up of 5-9 toothed leaflets. The bark does not show the diamond pattern typical of White and Green Ash. Ours show bark with more of a blocky pattern and a very slight coppery or brownish color. There are some more technical ways to tell a Blue Ash (twigs are hairless/leaf scar is not deeply notched), but the best diagnostic trait is found on young twigs. Not only are

they square in shape, they actually have wings! Before you start thinking of flying ash twigs, I will explain further. At each corner of the square branch, a few millimeters of fairly-rigid, parchment-like wing follows the twig. So, as you run your hand along the twig, you are also running your hand parallel to the wings. As the branches age, they lose these wings and the sharp angles of their square cross-section, but you can still see lines where the wings used to be (Petrides 1986).

Blues like to grow in moist forests with rich soil (Curtis 1971). Muskego Park Hardwoods is designated a State Natural Area (SNA) by the Bureau of Endangered Resources, of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (quite a mouthful). These State Natural Areas number about six hundred, and they are the highest quality natural communities left in the state. The sixty acres of woodland at Muskego is the best land we have, and the only Natural Area in Waukesha County's Park System. Evidently, it is rich enough for Blue Ash, and many other species. The DNR has the following information on SNA #112: "Muskego Park Hardwoods is an old-growth southern dry-mesic forest dominated by white and red oaks on a gently sloping southeast slope. Occasional large sugar maples occur along with a mixture of other trees such as bitternut hickory, shagbark hickory, butternut, walnut, white ash, basswood, black cherry, ironwood, and, of particular interest, Kentucky coffee tree (*Gymnocarpium dioicus*) and blue ash (*Fraxinus quadrangulata*). The southeast corner has a lowland forest with some elm and hackberry. The spring flora is exceptionally rich and contains wild leek, toothwort, bloodroot, declined trillium, reflexed trillium, green dragon, and red baneberry. The large populations of sweet cicely, honewort, black snakeroot, and wood avens are indicative of past grazing. Small woodland ponds lie in the northwest portion. Summer bird populations are representative of southern hardwoods and include the state-threatened cerulean warbler (*Dendroica cerulea*). Muskego Park Hardwoods is owned by Waukesha County and was designated a state natural area in December 1973."

While there are many uncommon species at Muskego, Blue Ash is in the most danger, because it is the only one threatened by the alien emerald ash borer. This invasive insect is already in southeast Wisconsin. We have not seen it at Muskego yet, but we are preparing anyway. In order to help the trees, we must first know where they are (or more to the point, where each individual tree is). We walked a grid through the forest, and recorded waypoints with a hand-held GPS unit, which gives us accuracy in a radius from about 25 feet to 50 feet. This is not accurate enough to pinpoint each tree, but it is accurate enough to relocate them in the field. As we took each waypoint, we recorded the diameter of each tree at breast height (4.5 feet) with a diameter tape. We did not measure seedlings (trees less than 1 inch DBH), but still took note of them when we found them. We now have a

(continued on half sheet)

(True Blue... continued)

baseline census to compare against future changes to the population. This is what we found:

- Total Number of Individual Trees: 167
- Total Diameter at Breast Height (sum of all trees): 849.9 inches
- Tree Diameter Size Classes
  - o 1-5.9 inches: 116 trees
  - o 6-11.9 inches: 44 trees
  - o 12+ inches: 7 trees

In addition to the above information, there are many Blue Ash seedlings growing at Muskego Park. These young whipper-snappers represent the recruitment (reproductive success) of the species. While our population is not quite gargantuan, the future looks bright. We will keep a close eye (or many eyes) on these Baby Blues, and watch closely for any of these so-called borers. This, by no account, means you should leave all the watching to us. Muskego Park has trails for a reason. Please come and visit the finest forest we have to show you.

*Mike*

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