



# CENTER LINE

A Publication of Waukesha County's Retzer Nature Center

Fall 2009

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## Upcoming Events:

- ◆ Apple Harvest Festival, Sept. 19
- ◆ Bird Seed Sale, Order Oct. 1-31
- ◆ Compost Workshop, Oct. 10
- ◆ Fall Color Hike, Oct. 17
- ◆ Basket Making Workshop, Oct. 17 & Nov. 14

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## MESSAGES FROM MEMISKONDINIMAANGANESHIINH

The voice of the Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) carries out and over the doldrums of winter. The vocal holds promise of warmer seasons, and brings joy and satisfaction to all birdwatchers. This messenger is welcomed by all.

The male Red-wing messenger is pitch-black in color with red shoulder patches bordered by yellow. The patches are his heraldic chevrons, so to speak. His beak is dark, sharp and pointed. His legs and feet are a dark grey. The female blackbird, on the other hand, is brown. She is pure brown on the topside and heavily streaked brown into a buffy-colored breast. She also sports a buffy to white shaded eyebrow. Mature Red-winged blackbirds will reach seven to nine and a half inches in length.

Red-winged blackbirds breed in most of North America, wintering in the southern half of the United States. At times they will fly as far down as Costa Rica. Males hold territories of 1/8 to 1/4 acre. They defend their space by singing from perches with wings spread open and their shoulder patches exposed. It has been noted that the red-wing will sometimes conceal his red chevron, and only show the yellow border. Wonder how he does this! Males in the breed must exude pure sex appeal, because they average three mates per breeding season.

Sloughs and ponds, marshes and meadows, swamps and adjacent open areas provide nesting places for the red-wings. Nests are made from reeds and grasses, using smaller materials to make the insides soft. They are placed in larger reeds, grasses, or shrubs. And they are hidden, three feet to eight feet, from the ground or water. Three to five eggs are laid in the nest. Eggs are pale greenish-blue with dark marks.

The colorful blackbirds are gregarious and congregate in flocks when feeding or roosting. At times, flocks number just a few, but the numbers can increase into the thousands. Multitudes can become annoying for the farmer, and raise havoc to his grain fields. The blackbirds feed on insects, a variety of seeds, and cracked corn. The birds, are noisy participants in their breeding season. The poet E. B. White (1899-1985) in the poem – A Listener's Guide to the Birds, (stanza 4) writes –

“The redwing (frequents swamps and marshes)  
Gurgles, “Konk-la-reeeee,”  
Eliciting from the wood duck  
The exclamation “Jeeee!”  
(but that’s the male wood duck, remember.  
If it’s his wife you seek,  
Wait till you hear a distressed “Whoo-ee!”)

Birdwatchers enjoy summer's excitement near lowland marsh areas, as the red-wings sway on the cattails and sound-off. However, if the watchers wander too close

(Messages... continued)

to the action, the red-wing blackbirds will dive-bomb your noggin, while releasing warnings that could make your hair stand on end. And I will testify to that!

As Autumn approaches, flocks suddenly disappear. The red-winged blackbirds find spots in the marshes where they hide in the vegetation, to begin molting their flight feathers. This is also a time for these feathers to regrow. With new flight feathers in place, the birds suddenly reappear, regroup, and gather their flight plans for migration to warmer climates.

An old Chitimache Indian legend explains how the messenger got his uniform. The old legend of the Mississippi Valley and Great Lakes region goes something like this. One day an Indian became so angry with everyone that he set fire to the marshes to burn up the place. A small blackbird saw this, flew up into a nearby tree and shouted "Ku nam wi cu!" which meant "The world and all is going to burn." The man replied, "If you don't go away, I will kill you." But the bird kept on shouting his warning. The Indian picked up a shell and hit the little bird on his wings, making them bleed. And that is how the red-winged blackbird came to sport his epaulets. Up to this day, however, this bird is still crying out the warning, "Ku nam wi cu!"

In most of the dialects of the Ojibwa language, this bird is called "memiskondinimaanganeshiinh," literally meaning, "a bird with a very red, damn little, shoulder blade."

In the indigenous language of the Great Plains Lakota, this bird is called "wabloka (wings of red). One of the bird songs described in Lakota language is "toke, mat a ni," translated ("oh! that I might die"). As an afterthought, there may be more substance to the old legend than we are aware of.

One book in my library that I feel compelled to read repeatedly is: "The Wilderness World of John Muir." In the 1857 the Muir family moved to Hickory Hill Farm, which is in Wisconsin. In the book, memories of his youth were taken from his earliest journals, and they bring to light his devotion and respect toward all things in nature. While working on the family farm, he would at times slip away and observe the flora and fauna of Wisconsin. "A Paradise of Birds" is a chapter in the book where Muir relates to the red-winged blackbird.

Muir writes:

"One of the gayest of the singers is the red-wing blackbird. In the spring, when his scarlet epaulets shine brightest, and his little

modest gray wife is sitting on the nest, built on rushes in a swamp, he sits on a nearby oak and devotedly sings almost all day... In summer after nesting cares are over, they assemble in flocks of hundreds and thousands to feast on Indian corn when it is in milk. Scattering over a field each selects an ear, strips the husk down far enough to lay bare an inch or two of the end of it, enjoys an exhilarating feast, and after all are full they rise simultaneously with a quick brrr of wings..."

John Muir goes on to compare the multitude of birds to an old-fashioned church congregation as the flocks rise and perch on the trees to belt out a hymn. The reader is drawn into this cacophony of bird song. Muir ends his tribute to the red-winged blackbirds as he relates,

"then suddenly some one of the joyful congregation shouts Chirr! Chirr! and all stop as if shot."

"The Wilderness World of John Muir" is a book for all of nature enthusiasts who will walk with him along his trails. In the interim enjoy the vociferous messages from Memiskondinimaanganeshiinh, the bird with a red, damn little, shoulder-blade!

See you on the trail,

*Shirley Blanchard*

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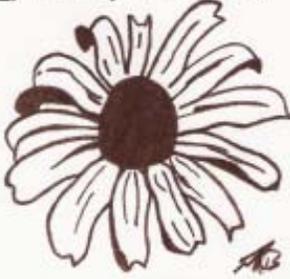
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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red-winged\\_Blackbird](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red-winged_Blackbird)

<http://www.native-languages.org/chitimachastory2.htm>



# The Last Prairie



## What Gall

Do you live near oak trees? Do they have little fuzzballs on the bottom of their leaves (and your yard, and your house, car, dog, self, so on, so forth)? Have you ever wondered “What in blazes...”? You are, without a doubt, not alone. Many strange things in the natural world are mysteries to us until they motivate us to take a closer look. If you take a closer look at these peach-colored, fuzzy spheres, you realize they are actually fuzzy houses for tiny little larvae that would rather have been left alone instead of introduced to sunlight at this very moment. If they are left alone, each of these little, white, developing cylinders will emerge next year as an adult wasp.

Wasp, the word is usually heard in varying stages of panic depending on how allergic or phobic you happen to be of flying insects with potent posteriors. The adjective ‘waspish’ is used to describe beings that are both irascible and likely to follow through with an attack when aggravated. Worry not; there is as much variability in Hymenoptera as any insect order. These are gall wasps, gallflies or Cynipid Wasps (from the family Cynipidae) and the only interests they have involving you are your trees. This is a large family of insects guilty of creating an equally impressive number of galls on plants, mostly oaks (Dunn 1996). Some species even use plant growths created by other insects. Since galls are stationary and quite conspicuous, we almost always know more about the galls than the species behind them. In fact, most species of gall wasp take their common names from the particular type of abnormal plant growth they cause, and these creatures cause a lot worth looking at. The Spongy Oak Apple Gall, the Mossy Rose Gall, the Jumping Oak Gall (yes, they do jump—do not confuse them with your Mexican Jumping Beans) and the Horned Oak Gall are all very strange and unusual, but what we are after is the Woolly Oak Gall Wasp (*Callirhytis lanata*).

That is right! If you answered yes to the questions in paragraph one (especially the one about the fuzzballs), you host a population of Woolly Gall Wasps. Again, worry not! Even large numbers will not adversely affect the host plant (Frost 1959). Each species of Cynipid is particular to its host and food plants and our wasp likes the Red Oak (*Quercus rubra*) group. The adults are shiny black and tiny, and by tiny I mean tiny. One centimeter, give or take, is tiny. They have long antennae (1/3 to 1/2 of their body length) of about 12-16 segments. They have nothing that you would call a stinger but they have an ovipositor (the female organ used for oviposition—the laying of eggs. In some species, the ovipositor can also pierce or sting) to place eggs in the host plant (Borror and Delong 1954). Let’s take a (brief) look at the life of this minute invertebrate.



Wolly Oak Gall

Some gall wasps go through complex cycles where two distinctly different developmental stages use two distinctly different galls in one year before becoming adults. In this strategy, females lay eggs that form galls and emerge as females (yes, every last one is female). This group then reproduces parthenogenetically (parthenogenesis is the act of reproducing by eggs that are not fertilized). These larvae also form galls, overwinter in their plant houses, and emerge next spring as males and females (Borror and Delong 1954). For simplicity’s sake (and for the sake that I have no idea whatsoever), we will assume that *Callirhytis lanata* only uses the one gall we named it for (it probably doesn’t, but let us assume it does).



Gall Wasp

In the early summer, both male and female Woolly Gall Wasps emerge as adults, set their wings and get to work on life. Throughout the summer months, the males sustain themselves on plant sap, flower nectar and other sugary juices (Burton 2002). At the same time, they are either avoiding predators by not attracting attention (read: ‘fly casually’) or retreating as fast as their little wings will carry them. If they live through the summer and make it to mating or parthenogenesis egg-laying season, the females locate the proper species by smelling and tasting specific chemical and oil formulations

(What Gall... continued)

on the target plant. This is very important because the wasp depends on a specific reaction from the host plant. Sometimes these chemicals appear on incompatible plants and the wasp will lay eggs on things that are definitely not Red Oaks. These pairings are both rare and almost always unsuccessful (Essig 1952). The successful galls are fully developed by October and begin their journey to the ground by themselves or when the leaves drop. The larvae stay in the galls and over-winter in the leaf litter on the ground. Next year, the whole thing begins anew.

Why gall at all? A plant's response to egg-laying and certain chemicals created by larvae can create food, shelter and formidable protection. This extra growth also throws up a red flag to all creatures adapted to utilizing either the gall itself, or the larva inside. The very same order that covers gall wasps also includes parasitic wasps with very long ovipositors. These insects use these long organs to 'sting' or bore their way into galls and lay eggs of their own. The hatching larvae usually feed on the grubs already present. Some species have evolved to use galls they had no part in making, consuming them for sustenance. Some of these animals simply coexist or quickly move on, but often the original occupants often do not have enough leftover food or protection from the elements (Frost 1959). Like every other reproductive strategy, this one is resourceful and effective but everything has its risks.

Men! Who needs 'em? One of the Cynipids makes its living on roses. The gall wasp *Diplolepis rosae* is partly responsible for the Bedeguar Gall (also 'Mossy Rose Gall' and 'Robin's Pincushion'). This does little harm to the rose and turns red in mid-summer and stays that way for months. The gall is compartmentalized inside, housing about 50 larvae in separate cells. The most interesting part is that the larvae and resulting adults are usually all female. Entomologists know of no alternation of generations in the Bedeguar Wasp and males of the species may be on their way out for good (Burton 2002).

With winter approaching, be sure to wish all your resident wasp larvae sweet dreams. You can rest assured that you will all weather the cold just fine. You will be safe in your home, and the Woolly Gall Wasps will be safe in theirs.

*Mike*

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### **Bird Seed Sale**

October 31 is the last day to place your Retzer bird seed order and to take advantage of those great sale prices.

**Call us at (262) 896-8007**

#### **PICK UP TIMES**

##### **Nashotah Park:**

Friday, November 6, 10 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

Saturday, November 7, 8 a.m. - 2 p.m.

##### **Minooka Park:**

Sunday, November 8, Noon - 4:30 p.m.

Monday, November 9, 10 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

##### **Moor Downs Golf Course Maintenance Building:**

(Located on Riverview, across from the County Juvenile Center)

Wednesday, November 11, Noon - 6 p.m.

Watch your  
mailbox for our  
2009 Bird Seed  
Flyer

## Friends of Retzer

### Membership:

The Friends of Retzer Nature Center are an active group dedicated to supporting the growth of Retzer Nature Center. There are many volunteer opportunities available to our members. If you would like to become a member or view some of our projects and activities, please visit our updated web site at <http://FriendsOfRetzer.org>. At the annual meeting in May three new board members were elected. They were Dawn St. George PhD, director at Old World Wisconsin; Mike Steger, social studies teacher at Kettle Moraine Middle School; and Joe Vitale, retired Waukesha Elementary School Principal and environmental educator. Outgoing members were Lucy Dauffenbach, Mary Roberts, and Dave Welnetz. Continuing members are Ted Carlsen (Vice President), Susan Carlton, Dawn Carr, Lyle Drier (co-Treasurer), Robert Glusick, Mary Langill (co-Treasurer), Steve Martin, Richard Nawrocki, and Jerry Strom (President).

We are also interested in starting more blog sites. Currently we have a bluebird blog and a Camera Club blog. If you would like to be a blog leader for blogs relating to nature topics contact the Friends at [info@FriendsOfRetzer.org](mailto:info@FriendsOfRetzer.org).

### Apple Fest:

Mark your calendars for another great time at Retzer Nature Center. Apple Fest will be held on Saturday, September 19. The Friends will need your help in several areas including the booth at the entrance, silent auction and hayride. Please call Retzer at 262-896-8007 if you can help out.

### WeCare Program:

The Friends have joined the We Care Program at Pick 'n Save grocery stores. As a result we can all support the Friends of Retzer's program goals every time we shop at our local Pick 'n Save. Sign up for an Advantage card at the service counter or change your current Advantage card and designate the Friends of Retzer Nature Center as your charity of choice (you can only designate one charity). Our account number is 246125 or just indicate the Friends of Retzer Nature Center. A percentage of every dollar you spend will automatically be donated to the Friends.

### Fall Field Trip:

This year the Friends are planning a members only field trip to the International Crane Foundation. Check out the date and time at the Friends of Retzer website <http://FriendsOfRetzer.org>. To find out more about the Crane Foundation go to their website at <http://savingcranes.org>.

# Mark your calendar!

## Apple Harvest Festival

### Saturday, September 19th

### 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Sponsored by:



### See insert for more detailed information.



## RETZER NATURE CENTER

WAUKESHA COUNTY PARKS & LAND USE  
S14 W28167 MADISON STREET  
WAUKESHA, WI 53188

**Return Service Requested**

### *A Sincere Thanks to All...*

*The following individuals or groups have donated to Retzer Nature Center since the last issue of CENTER LINE. Their support is greatly appreciated.*

- Cash donation from the Benjamin F. Goss Bird Club.
- Cash donations in memory of Nancy Auchter: from Mr. & Mrs. Gary W. Stevens, James & Betty Nelden, Brian & Paula Stich, Earl Davison, Earl & Sara Hudson, David Block, Anne Moretti, Ellen Krzyston, Lorraine Fundingsland, Allan Clouse, Vernon & Judith Aune, Thomas & Pam Ziegler, Ruth Adams & Lynn Bliese, Donald & Christine Reel, Michael & Jennifer Tyskiewicz, Richard Smith, Mr. & Mrs. F. R. Winchell, Ursula Glander, Shirley Brown, Bruce & Katherine Macintyre, Sue Stealey, Joseph Hemmer and many anonymous cash donations.
- "Environmental Views Series" CD's from Shirley Blanchard.
- Cash donation from Redeemer United Church of Christ.
- Lynn Sprangler from Modern Woodsman of America for the donation of many pairs of gardening gloves.
- Richard Smith cash donation.
- Flower press from Lisa Motzel.