



CENTER LINE

A Publication of Waukesha County's Retzer Nature Center

Spring 2010

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Upcoming Events:

- ◆ Aldo Leopold Weekend Saturday, March 6
- ◆ Morning Bird Hikes Fridays in April, May & June
- ◆ Earth Week Activities April 18 - 24
- ◆ Spring Plant Sale May 8

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Waukesha County Park System
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SPRING IS SPRUNG

Spring is sprung

The grass is riz

I wonder where

Da flowers is

This remembered bit of nonsense echoes thru my brain every spring. Winter is losing its hold on Wisconsin's landscape and nature is greening under warmer sunrays. There's a broad smile on my face while rummaging over my walking shoes and I'm wondering where da flowers is, getting ready to take a hike to find um.

Underground rhizomes of some early spring flowers prefer the open woodlands. Patches of their pointed stalks can be found under near-leafless forest trees. Odd pointed stalks bear lobed leaves which unfold looking like tiny umbrellas in the bare soil. With this info, you can already guess which early plants are discovered even though you can't see the blooms. They are odd looking Mayapples, *Podophyllum peltatum*. Mayapples form one single white flower which is hidden under their green umbrellas. A two-inch blossom immorges on a short stem from the angle of two leaf stalks. Only plants with two leaves will produce flowers. Its fruit appears in midsummer as a small lemon-colored berry and gives the early spring flower a common name, which is Wild Lemon. At times Mayapples can be spotted on open hillsides. Other times they could be stretched out on the meadows, where they will open out their dark green parasols and congregate in large circles.

If it takes three tries to get it right, the early spring flower, *Trillium grandiflorum* becomes the model for perfection. Trillium ("threes") is the awesome title bestowed on this pristine white flower. The Trillium has worked with this number to become the grandiflorum that it is. The flower has three white petals, three green sepals, three leaves, three x two stamens, and three stigmas. Offhand, what other early spring flower has used arithmetic with such perfection in its modeling! Spring wanderers will easily identify this early spring bloomer, and as the plant blooms several weeks longer than other early arrivals, more visits to the sites can be planned when weather permits. Remember *Trillium grandiflorum* is a protected plant and should not be picked. An interesting note, however, this North American native was one of the first plants to make a reversal in the pattern of plant exchange, making trips back to Old World English gardens. Another species of trillium, less spectacular, than the grandiflorum, is called White Nodding Trillium. Nodding trillium must be sought out, for it's always found off the beaten track or road. *Trillium flexipes* is much smaller, and its flower hangs modestly with its face to the ground. Nevertheless, finders of trillies will always wear a happy-face when wandering onto their scene.

Spring is the season for trial exploration. Everywhere something new is in the air. Birds, blades, or buds, discoveries for all ages. However, this article will concentrate on a few of the earliest spring flowers. Edwin Way Teale called the violets the "footprints of spring", and it's up to the spring hikers to make the footprints, and meadows. Might find them in your own back yard if you're lucky. Though they are tiny, there are about 100 species in the United States, and

(Spring is Sprung... continued)

they come in colors of purple, blue, yellow, and white. Wisconsin has selected the violet as the state flower. Which species of the flower remains a mystery? My vote is for Birdfoot violet. *Viola pedata*, or Prairie violet, *Viola pedatifida*. All the violets have five petals. Two top, two



side, and a low one that serves as the landing runway for insects. Leaf forms do vary, but heart-shaped is typical. The Downy Yellow Violet, *Viola pubescens* is an example of the species variation. This species has a leafy stem above the ground, with the flower in the leaf

axil. Another beautiful purple violet is the Arrow-leaved Violet, *Viola sagittata*. This violet has long-stalked, arrowhead-shaped basal leaves that are about 3" long. They are longer than they are wide, and the leaf edges have small, shallow teeth. All violet species are tiny plants developing to heights of only six inches or less. They can be found in moist or dry prairies or open woodlands. They gather around oak savannas, and can be spotted in sandy or rocky soils. Although the tiny plant's shadow could conceal its flower, keen eyes searching will discover the shy little violets. Exploring Wisconsin trails in spring can be exciting and agreeable, and don't forget the camera!

Final dregs of winter seep into the northern tallgrass region. Steams, brooks, and fens collect the runoff and sparkle with renewed energy. Where trails cross these energetic waterways, early blooming *Caltha palustris* will be found. Native Americans called them cowslips "The flower that opens the swamps". Today Marsh Marigold supports this flower's Latin name. Marsh Marigolds are early messengers of spring and spring is the time to seek them out, because they are short-lived, and by summer they are not to be found. Their bright yellow blossoms are like bits of sunshine; even on an overcast day, two-inch wide, bright yellow flowers shine on individual stalks near the top of the plant. Each flower has 5 to 6, sometimes more, glossy, petal-like sepals surrounding numerous stamens, which pose on a mound of kidney-shaped leaves. There are no true petals. The two inch, buttery yellow blossoms can easily be spotted along the streams, brooks, fens, and marshy areas. In early spring seasons, competition from other vegetation is minimal. Therefore, the Marsh Marigolds, in all their glory, put on a display for all who pass. No charge and you can linger, as long as you wish to enjoy their view.

Before heading toward summer, homage must be made to the first prairie flowers appearing for their early spring appointments. From years of walking Wisconsin trails, I no longer wonder where these flowers are. I know where they are, and the soft furry buds that form delicate shades of blue, violet, or white blossoms can be found close to home. This single flower on a stem has 5 to 8 showy

petal-like sepals. The petal-like sepals are 1 ½" long, at the outer point. Leaf segments are lobed and toothed. Usually the flowering stems grow in a clump and although the flowering period is brief, it is spectacular. The delicate shades of blue, violet, or white surrounding the seed heads, against the drab background of winter's remains, lift the spirits. You have discovered the unique Pasque Flower, *Anemone patens*. Its common name refers to the time of its blooming, which is around Easter or Passover. If you miss their spectacular showing, you may see the remaining distinctive feathery seed heads. Like Prairie Smoke, the seed-like fruits are tipped with feathery hairs, that wave in the breezes. The Pasque Flower is a true Midwesterner that makes its grand appearance, without fanfare in Wisconsin's unpredictable weather. Now where do you go to pay homage to the Pasque Flower's performance? You can take the Prairie Trail up to the Vista at our very own Retzer Nature Center.

See you on the trail,

Shirley Blanchard

References:

Edsall, Marian S. (1985). *Roadside Plants and Flowers*. University of Wisconsin. Madison, WI.

Todd, Douglas M. (1995). *Tallgrass Prairie Wildflowers*. Falcon Publishing, Inc., Helena, MT.

Writers own experience hiking the trails.



Friends of Retzer Nature Center

The Friends of Retzer Nature Center is a registered, 501 (c)3, organization dedicated to encouraging, perpetuating, and promoting the work of conservation and natural resource education.

The organization seeks the involvement of the community in the form of financial and volunteer support to work toward the continued growth and improvement of Retzer Nature Center. 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>.



Reminder: Friends Annual Meeting and Chili Supper is Monday, April 26. Check our website for event details.

HEARTWOOD



ANTLERS!

Perhaps nothing found in the woods is as instantly fascinating as a shed deer antler.

A shed antler attests to the direct physical presence of a large, charismatic animal that many people rarely get close to. It provides a set of clues about the animal's size, age, and physical condition. It offers clues about the animal's habitat, including the extent and quality of food and cover. It also may tell of some of the other animals that share that habitat. Finding a "shed" guarantees a half-hour adventure of keen observation, careful measurement, and lively discussion!



First of all, an antler is not a horn. A horn, such as cows, sheep, and goats have (and also gazelles and antelope) stays on the animal's head throughout its life (unless it gets broken off—or is purposely removed by the animal's human keepers!). A horn has a bony core (a direct extension of the skull), covered by a sheath of "horn" (a protein material similar to that of fingernails). Horns grow on the heads of both male and female animals, and they grow in a continuous fashion from the base; their length and condition is then shaped by a lifetime of impacts.

Antlers, on the other hand, grow on the heads of members of the deer family (Cervidae), including White-tailed Deer, Mule Deer and Elk (out west), and Moose (up north). For most species, antlers grow on the heads of males (known around the world as bucks, stags, or harts), and they re-grow and are shed again every year. The growth of antlers occurs during spring and summer (the season of greatest food availability). It happens as a result of outgrowths of richly-vascularized skin called velvet (so-called because of its fuzzy appearance); the blood-rich skin of the velvet deposits bony material beneath the surface, which builds up and branches out in a characteristic shape and pattern. As the year's antler growth is completed in late summer, the velvet skin dies and sloughs off—the buck helps this process by thrashing his antlers in the brush and rubbing them on trees. It's not uncommon to see a late-summer or early-fall buck with antlers festooned by tattered dangling strips of velvet, in the process of falling off. The new antlers become polished and sharpened as a result of brush-thrashing, tree-scraping, and battling with other bucks (more on this below—antlers being an important asset to the bucks, in their competition for females during the breeding season!). At winter's end, the antlers begin to loosen their attachment to the skull, and ultimately drop off the buck's head (perhaps with the help of being struck against trees). The bloody divots left in the buck's now-antlerless head are quickly healed over; the shed antlers lie in the woods, waiting for you to find.

However, if you don't find the shed antlers, other inhabitants of the woods and fields definitely will. Chief among these enthusiasts are White-footed Mice, Deer Mice, and Meadow Voles. Chipmunks, Gray and Fox Squirrels, Red Squirrels, Woodchucks, Muskrats, Beavers, and Cottontail Rabbits also relish them. These members of the Rodent group have paired gnawing teeth (upper and lower) that are constantly growing. Being able to feed on tough foods such as seeds, nuts, and bark requires that these teeth be kept short and sharp, which requires that rodents constantly chew (as any owner of a gerbil, hamster, or guinea pig will tell you!); a rodent that doesn't do so will be in serious trouble, with teeth getting so long that feeding becomes impossible. So the discovery of a shed antler provides a rodent with weeks of dental health. But that's not all—the chewed bits of antler are also a nutritious source of the essential nutrient calcium ("which builds strong bones and teeth"), which the rodents find to be delicious. So a shed antler is truly a rodent treasure, and any sheds you manage to find are almost sure to bear witness to this! Look closely at the antler, and notice the parallel grooves on it, the chew marks of happy rodents.



(Antlers!... continued)

Measure the width of the paired tooth marks and use the following list to identify the chewers—

- White-footed Mouse/Deer Mouse <1/16"
- Chipmunk <1/8"
- Gray Squirrel/Fox Squirrel 1/8"
- Muskrat 1/4"
- Beaver 1/2"
- Meadow Vole >1/16"
- Red Squirrel <1/8"
- Woodchuck 1/4"
- Cottontail Rabbit 1/4"

Shed antlers have the reputation of only being find-able during the early Spring, then they seem to sort of melt away...but we know differently, that they become part of the “strong bones and teeth” of the habitat’s resident rodents!

A buck’s antlers are inseparably bound up in his role during the breeding season. As he competes with other bucks over a female (doe), the buck uses his antlers to mark territory (scarring trees with visual evidence of his presence), and to challenge and occasionally fight with other bucks (these fights can occasionally cause injury, but are more often a way for the strongest buck to drive the others away). In all of this, the size and heft of the antlers give evidence of the buck’s health and condition—and of his fitness as a potential father to the next generation of fawns. Magnificent antlers show clearly that the buck is in the prime of life (neither too young nor too old), and is in good health (since the production of these antlers attests to the healthy functioning of his body systems). They also reflect a habitat containing abundant, high quality plant food—since the yearly growth of antlers is a direct byproduct of feeding. The number of points on the antlers does not (as some claim) tell how old the buck is, though small antlers with few points may be found on young or old bucks, or on bucks without a sufficient supply of nutritious plant food—this may coincide with a habitat whose carrying capacity for deer has been exceeded, through overpopulation due to scarcity of predators.

Antlers are part of the culture of hunting, and of hunters. The search for a buck with a trophy rack of antlers has always been an elevated part of the experience. The scoring of trophy racks is an interesting process that involves careful measurement and exacting calculation. The Boone and Crockett Club (a conservation organization co-founded by conservationist-president Theodore Roosevelt) has developed a scoring system that has been in use for nearly sixty years, and which allows the keeping of antler records in various categories. Antlers are classified as “typical” (with the “standard” arrangement of antler points for the particular species) and “atypical” (with a very individual—and sometimes bizarre—arrangement of points). Specific assignment of points within these categories is a complex matter, and requires the services of Club-certified Measurers, to do it properly. The Boone and Crockett Club may be found on-line at <http://www.boone-crockett.org/>

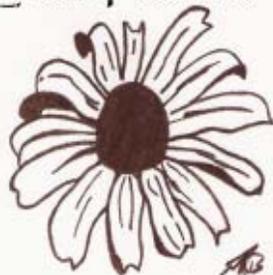
The end of winter, or the early spring, is the time to go out into the woods in search of sheds. Some folks collect enough of them to make beautiful craft objects (rustic lodges may even sport chandeliers made from shed antlers!). But for me, the chance to find just one shed antler—complete with polished tips and assorted tooth marks—is a completely unique window into the land’s life. What trees bear the marks of this antler? What battles did the buck fight? Is he the father of fawns yet to be born this coming June? What mice have chewed this antler, and where have they gone? Have they been eaten by one of our owls? Will the next owl pellet I find contain the mouse jaws that made these tooth marks? These and other questions occupy my mind as I bring the antler to the Discovery Table in our Exhibit Hall, for you to see.

But why not anticipate Spring, by getting out in the woods and finding a shed for yourself?!

Larry



The Last Prairie



ORIGINS

She was a city girl by birth and working a clerical position for an electric company, she met a young, would-be engineer applying for a job. This man was also a would-be suitor, date, boyfriend, fiancé, and eventual husband. After at least one child, two apartments, one house, and three years in Missouri, fate lobbed them up to Wisconsin. Now in Wausau (here), as opposed to St. Louis (there), it was, in fact, just as legend told; much colder. But it also had four complete seasons, which meant a legitimate winter to complain about. The man took to the weather and rural atmosphere quicker than his wife, who missed her family and was now ... here. Don't get Wausau wrong, it was growing quickly and even had a McDonald's, but it was no St. Louis. So, while Wausau grew, the family of three turned to what Wisconsin did have to offer; the outdoors.

The outdoors was rougher than the indoors, offering few things most would define as luxuries. What it does offer is freedom. The unfettered sky, unprotected ground, and uninhibited wildlife all belong to the outdoors. The outdoors also offers perspective; if you do not feel at least a little small, just a little insignificant when you are not confined by shelter, you are (at least in this author's opinion) not looking properly. Only when you accept just how big 'outside' is, are you able to then appreciate the majesty therein. Something so big, so complex and so incredible can only be truly appreciated when viewed in perspective of one's place in it. Only then can you accept that you are a part of it; and only then will you take responsibility for it.

Perhaps no one ever truly understands their niche out of doors, and this only becomes more difficult as our society moves from actual to virtual, but the young engineer embraced it nonetheless. He was the first to long for wilderness and made strides to experience it, dragging his family with him further and further into it. This was difficult at first, the child was impressionable and easily bored, but the real challenge was with his wife. Not up to mosquitoes or any environment that would foster such things, she found it difficult to see anything of value when on outdoor trips. She continued to

accompany her husband, mostly because she loved him but partly because nature was sneaking up on her; or was it the other way around? Whatever the reason, her protests and arguments against the family ventures grew weaker and weaker. One would almost say she actually wanted to 'go outside'.

This was the beginning to many life-changing experiences few could have foretold. Time after time, the young woman of the city proved that she had the fortitude for the country. True grit did not conquer nature, but embraced it and worked with it. Small beginnings led to hiking, cross country skiing, camping, and canoeing. Eventually, the two planned and undertook a fly-in trip to Quetico Provincial Park on the north side of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. Two weeks later, they paddled across the Canadian border into Minnesota waters for the last night of their stay. I remember the night well, we reflected on all the steps leading up to this point and laughed at how the odds of taking this remote trip changed year by year. Canada was a great experience, but it is that night on U. S. soil that I remember most.

I have written before that it is my parents that instilled my respect for the wild and free. My father introduced me to nature and taught me to appreciate it. My mother taught me that it is possible to love something if you have an open heart and mind. These impressions endure and will be with me until my faculties are no more. When I look back, my mom also showed me that even a city mouse can only resist the Wisconsin Northwoods for so long; she never had a chance.

Dedicated to my mother and friend, Sandra Ann Bourquin.

Mike



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 Mrs. Geraldine Pari

Cash donation from Mary E. Connell

Cash donation from Mr. & Mrs. Steven Fleming



RETZER NATURE CENTER

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

Return Service Requested

Retzer Nature Center Celebrating 40 Years of Earth Week

Join us for these FREE fun activities. Registration may be required.

Please check our website for more details.

Canoe Outing - Sunday, April 18 at 1 PM

GPS Aided Hiking - Tuesday, April 20 from 10-11:30 AM
(Adult Program)

Birds of Prey - Wednesday, April 21 from 7-8:30 PM

Morning Bird Hike - Friday, April 23 from 7-8:30 AM

Saturday, April 24

JACK YOUNG MEMORIAL EARTH WATCH
(5 AM-12:30 PM)

FAMILY BIRD WATCH
(9 AM-Noon)

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITY
(Noon-3 PM)
Call Holly to register at (262) 896-8074.

DISCOVER COMPOST—Family Activity
(Noon-1 PM)

FAMILY & CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES
"Recycled Beauty" - Nature activities & games
Kite Making Workshop
(Noon-5 PM)

SAVE WATER, SAVE MONEY
WITH RAIN GARDENS & RAIN BARRELS
(1-2 PM)

TREES & WILDFLOWERS HIKE
(2-3 PM)

MAGICAL MYSTERY TOUR: Guided Twilight Hike
(Approx. 7:15-9:00 PM)

Sponsored by:



EDUCATION CORNER

IS IT TIME?

I remember growing up and asking “Is it time yet?” My parents would usually respond with “not yet” or “soon”. How often do we tell children today this same response? It is a timeless statement and works well when children are small and do not realize or understand the concept of time. We soon forget that time is just that “time” – it goes no faster or slower depending on an activity or event, but maintains a constant pace as we all stay in step to its beat.

How does this relate to a nature center? – Good question. Give me a second and I will give you my insight on this account. Yes, it is time! It is time to journey outdoors and revel in all that awaits you on an early spring day. We spend way too much time doing the things that are required of us and have forgotten to stop and take time to do those things that bring a sense of calm as we enjoy them.

Spring brings new life to our monochrome world as it awakens and begins again. It holds the first glimpse of bright colors and a renewal of that which was held in a sleepy slumber. We long to discover time to find a tiny green sprout poking up through the last remnants of dirty snow or waiting for the first Red-winged Blackbird to make its way back from a warm vacation down south. Getting children and adults to stop and take a moment to look at what is beginning again will inevitably be the best reward we can pass on as we all move with time’s endless race and soon forget to linger for a moment to smell the first flower or hear the first bird’s song that spring has given us.

We must at times put down the cell phones, ipods, computers, and video games that entangle our lives through an electrical pulse. Hit the pause button and leave the daily chores that weight us all down and go out to encounter the “firsts” of spring. Winter is finally disappearing, the cold temperatures that held us hostage have moved on and we find ourselves yearning to be outdoors. Look at a local college campus on the first slightly warm day and see the vast number of students sunbathing, playing a pick up game of football or walking around in t-shirts and shorts. Spring is just waiting for us all to take time to discover secrets once more.

This spring stop in the moment and enjoy a handful of “firsts” that you may not have been in contact with since last winter’s ice age.

(over)

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(over)

Steps to finding the time—

1. Stop—put down whatever you are doing and head outdoors. No excuses, this is a good time to find a first”.
2. Locate a point that is of interest to you, it can be the backyard, driveway, porch, field or any other destination of your choosing. Look, stare, or just gaze upon your site. What “first” will you find there? If nothing comes to you, move around to a new position and see what “first” you can find. That second in time when you realize you found new cache that you have not seen or noticed before will let the clock reward you in a brief moment were time stands still.
3. Repeat daily or as often as you can let go. Look for new spots that you have not seen or viewed before and rediscover the times when spring stands still just for you. Do this for yourself; you will be thankful later on.

One of my first stops each spring is down to the creek just off the boardwalk to find the “first” purple tip of the Skunk Cabbage poking its flower up from a winters snooze. Realizing that I know what to look for yet I still have trouble locating the first tip. At the instant when I spot that first hint of deep violet color, a field of purple tips soon captures my view and the count begins. This first for me, usually late February or early March, many sneak peaks might occur before the first is found.



Another “first” is a walk along the Adventure Trail in late April to behold the spring wildflowers just unfolding their blooms. Trying to remember all the different names of each flower as I find them is still a wonderful adventure. Even after 10 years of working at the Nature Center, I still get confused and forget the names to a few each time I wander along the trail in search of the newly opened blooms. Winter seems to make more than just nature sleep; it also puts a grey fog on my memory. Back to my office where I find my copy of “Wildflowers of Wisconsin”, I page through the colored photos verifying whether I got each “first” flowers sightings name correct or maybe only to bolster my memory that I have not forgotten most from the previous spring’s walk.

We all need to take a break from the rat race and speed of life to remember that there is time to slow down and remember all that our world has for us to enjoy as spring begins anew.

Amy Zentner, Naturalist

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