

APRIL 15-30, 2016 NATURAL HISTORY NOTES FOR EASTVIEW

By Dick Harlow

EPHEMERALS



Wakerobin, *Trillium sulcatum* © Dick Harlow

This is the time of year when out walking you might catch a glimpse of a spring wildflower that is considered an ephemeral. By definition a spring ephemeral is transitory, a "perennial plant that emerges quickly in the spring and dies back to their underground parts after a short growth and reproduction phase." In other words an ephemeral plant is one that does not last long; its life cycle is short.

Other ephemeral wildflowers that you might see while walking are: Dutchman's Breeches, Marsh Marigold, Trout Lily, Dogtooth Violet and White Trillium to name a few.

Remember that ephemerals are transitory; in other words, they quickly bloom when there is a hint of spring warmth, go to seed, die back and disappear with little trace as soon as spring warmth segues into the beginning of summer heat.

PURPLE CONE FLOWER



Purple Coneflower, *Echinacea purpurea*,
© Dick Harlow 2014

Echinacea is a much-loved native flower found in gardens. Gardeners plant it for its beauty, medicinal value and attraction for butterflies. Butterflies and various species of bees, including the honeybee, complete its pollination.

Besides the beauty, this plant has a lot going for it. Its only predator during the growing season is the slug. It is deer resistant and it blooms throughout spring into summer. It will grow in loam, clay or till as long as it is in the sun. It is not a shade plant.

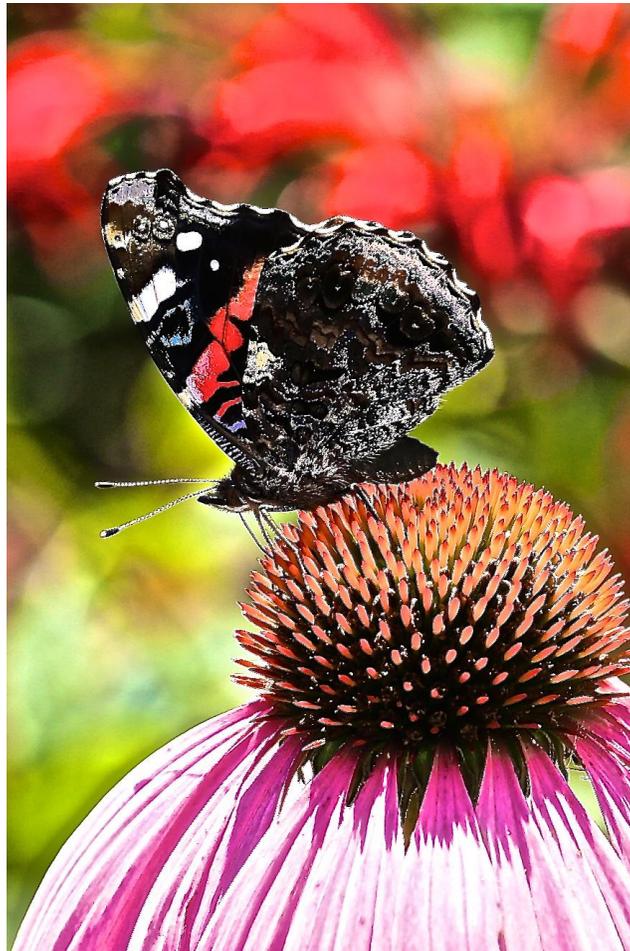
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Purple Coneflower, single flower
Echinacea purpurea, © Dick Harlow 2014

This plant has been known since man first came to this continent as a medicinal plant. It is still considered an important medicinal plant by Native American Indians. It is used both internally and externally. Externally for burns, wounds, insect bites and internally for toothaches, stomach cramps and cough.



Purple Coneflower, & Red Admiral,
Vanessa atalanta © Dick Harlow 2015

The above picture shows a Red Admiral Butterfly feeding and pollinating an Echinacea blossom. If you like birds and you want them to have some native food during the winter, leave the stalks and flower heads during the fall and winter and you will enjoy the finches when they come to your garden to remove the seeds from the flower heads.

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HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT



Hidden in plain sight © Sara Green

As mentioned in my April 1-14 notes, did you find the critter? If it was tough you might need to have enlarged the photograph to see it.

To hide from predators or to be a predator and to hide from your prey is a means for survival. Can you find it and name what it is? This animal is so camouflaged that unless you see it move, you or any animal walking by wouldn't see it.

If you look center and slightly left you will see a snake climbing a tree. Look for a wiggle in the bark, not the semi-straight rigid and deep cuts of the bark. The snake is using the ridges of the bark of the tree to give it traction. The bark grooves help it to leverage itself up the tree. What kind of snake is it? Not very colorful; as a matter of fact it blends right into the colors of the tree bark. But, if you look at the patterns and the semi-triangular shape of the head you would determine that it is a poisonous snake. Believe it or not, many snakes climb trees. Rat snakes in the mid-south climb trees and Coral snakes in the south climb trees. Certainly constrictors climb trees, but to be honest, I don't give much thought to poisonous snakes climbing trees unless I am in the tropics. The only poisonous snake that I know of in the Northeast that can do this is the Copperhead. This is quite a nice shot of how camouflage, changing color to suit your environment, or habitat, etc., will help this predator find his/her prey. Snakes will prey on birds' eggs, birds, rodents, lizards and other snakes.

Some people looking at this picture have said they thought they were looking at a nymph or larva or a small frog when all they could see at first was the head. Looking at the head without the tail could be anything that your imagination might conjure up.

I have always wondered whether illusions, or leaping before you look, or grabbing at something before you know what it is, contributes to one's mistakes, harm, or demise when talking about animals or humans. Can you imagine how you might feel, or what might have happened if you were a kid, playing hide and seek, using this tree for cover and grabbing the tree bark where the snake is hidden. Not a pleasant thought!

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TREE SWALLOW



Tree Swallow, *Tachycineta bicolor*
© Dick Harlow 2016

The Tree Swallow is a migratory bird. It breeds in most of North America and winters in Mexico, Central America, and the neighboring Caribbean islands.

As many of you know we have a number of nest "Bluebird" boxes stationed around campus. Some of these boxes are not suitable for the birds. Some are too close to the Inn or on poles that are too short. Our love of birds and watching them for our own enjoyment can be a detriment to their safety. Some birds will risk nesting under these situations especially when nest box numbers are at a premium. Nest boxes when put up the recommended way, according to National Bluebird Society, is to mount a nest box on a pole that is sturdy, tall, between 6-7 feet above ground with a predator guard mounted below the box and a fair distance from human habitation.

Birds need security to minimize opportunities for predators. Raccoons, snakes, rats, cats, and for that matter curious humans can create serious stress and difficulties. All the bird wants is a safe place to nest and bring up its young.

There are species other than the Eastern Bluebird who will occupy a nest box meant for what people think is a bluebird box. A good example of a species that will try and occupy one or many of these boxes is the Tree Swallow.

Tree Swallows will usually be at EastView early enough to give other box nesters competition for a particular box. If you see two Tree Swallows perched next to each other on a box, or one going into the box and sticking its head out of the opening while the other one is perched on the box, that probably means they have bonded to each other and have bonded to the box.

Can they be "kicked out" of a box? Yes! European Starlings and House Sparrows can successfully do this, but only when these non-native birds are in high density. There are other native species that could, but only in situations that are different from what we have here at EastView.

If you see a Tree Swallow bringing nesting material and feathers to the box, especially white feathers, she is close to laying eggs. She will usually lay four white eggs but has been known to lay as many as seven. More than 4 eggs represent an abundance of food in the area. The female is the sole incubator of the eggs, which takes about fourteen days for the eggs to hatch and between two and a half to three weeks to fledge. The male helps by replacing the female giving her time to feed, but she is the primary incubator. The male will

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also help in feeding the young. Tree Swallows have one brood a season, but have been known, if their first attempt fails early enough due to weather or predators, to try again.

Once Tree Swallow young fledge and within a week or so of fledging, most Tree Swallows leave for the coast. They will congregate in large flocks along the coast for a while and then move slowly south during their fall migration.



Tree Swallow, arguing *Tachycineta bicolor*
© Dick Harlow 2016

'Hawking' is a term used when birds fly from a perch to catch insects on the wing. An example would be when Cedar Waxwings fly from a perch during a stream hatch to catch an insect then fly back to the perch. Tree Swallows, like all swallows, are insect eaters, which they eat on the wing. Since they are constantly catching insects while flying it is not the same as hawking, flying from a perch to catch an insect. This is one reason why we like them in our backyard, especially as they eat mosquitoes! However, as I have mentioned in other articles, swallows are susceptible to both weather and pesticide spraying. When they first arrive here in Vermont the primary factor is the weather. When it is cold or we have long bouts of stormy weather these events will prevent them and the insects from flying. Once the weather warms they will be right at home performing aerobatics chasing flying insects.

OBSERVATIONS

Due to weather our observations of other critters has been rather infrequent.

MAMMALS

Meadow Vole (in garden)
White-footed Mouse (in shed)
Eastern Cottontail Rabbit (scat)
Gray Squirrel (bird feeders)
Coyote (heard)

AMPHIBIANS

Eastern Toad
Leopard Frog

Weather Tidbits

Month of APRIL 2016

[All Measurements taken at solar noon \(1230 EST\).](#)

PRECIPITATION

Total Precipitation: 45.4 mm or 1.8 inches.

-2.2" of rain for the month.

Overcast Days: 9

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WIND

Highest wind gust: April 3, 32 MPH, Direction: North

Average Wind speed for April: 2.1 mph,

Dominate Wind Direction: North

Days w/wind gusts 20-30 MPH: 16

Days w/wind gusts >30 MPH: 1

TEMPERATURE

Mean Temp: 4.5 C⁰/40.1⁰F

High Temp: 20.9 C⁰/69.6⁰F

Low Temp: -8.2 C⁰/17.2⁰F

DAYS OF:

Max. Temp. 0.0 C⁰/32⁰F: 4 days

Min. Temp. 0.0 C⁰/32⁰F: 17 days