

Nature Week at Heritage Village - May 10th

Before the Leaves

Burgeoning - what a wonderful word to describe the current burst of activity in the woods. Two types of plants are flowering now, exploiting opportunity before the trees' leaves are fully formed.



Hepatica can be white or purple

Grab the sun

First and most noticeable are the spring wildflowers. These forest-floor bloomers are quick to catch the heat and energy of the spring sun. The flowers are highly visible and can easily attract pollinators such as last week's bees. At least a half dozen species are already in bloom. Once the trees leaf out these flowers

will die and the plants will begin the process of seed formation.

Grab the wind

Second are the wind pollinated trees. Yes, trees too flower although the blossoms may not be showy. Wind pollinated flowers are minimalistic. They waste no energy on extra flower parts. Indeed they need to keep an open air flow to disperse the pollen grains onto the awaiting female stigmas, hence they bloom before the tree leaves get in the way. At least three tree species are in bloom right now. Can you spot them? Wind-borne pollen is one source of spring allergies.



Witch hazel is a spring shrub

A Recycling Team

A tree on the Heritage Village entry drive took a beating over the winter. Before a crew cuts it down I thought it would be worth a mention. This tree is being recycled by the teamwork of ants and birds.

If any part of a tree dies carpenter ants may move in. A fertilized female ant looks for moist dead wood in which to build a nesting colony in late spring. She lays eggs that will hatch into female workers. Over a few years the nest will grow into thousands of workers. Then one spring the queen will lay eggs that hatch into both male and females. They swarm, the females are impregnated and off the females go in search of a new nesting site. The males all die; the original nest continues. Our tree has been used by a colony for many, many years and is riddled with ant chambers.

Pileated woodpeckers prefer to eat carpenter ants, lapping them up with their long, sticky, forked tongue. You can hear the birds at great distances in the forest, whacking out the wood to access the ant tunnels. They use their long neck to pull way back and then use the pull of their feet to really blast their strong bill into a tree. Their long, specially-adapted tail feathers provide balance on the tree. The resulting wood chips are big and, when seen at the base of a tree, an indication of woodpecker activity. Often you see big square holes in trees from the birds' efforts but in our case the whole side of the tree is gone. The square holes become home to many of the forest's other inhabitants like owls, ducks, squirrels, and bats. Our local favorite, the saw-whet owl, nests in pileated woodpecker holes.



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The inspiration for Woody Woodpecker, these birds are about 18 inches tall, mate for life, and can live to be 12 years old. They occasionally eat berries, including poison ivy berries.