

# OBSERVATIONS FROM NATURE

OCTOBER, 2011

PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
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## October 4

Lots of birds continue to visit the bird bath we have connected to the deck rail. The two photographs on the left show a Black-throated Green Warbler (*Dendroica virens*) stopped by for a bath.



Below is a Tufted Titmouse (*Baeolophus bicolor*) vigorously splashing.





It looks pretty well washed.



### **October 6**

In the notes for August 28, I showed a milkweed plant that was flowering. At the time I wondered if it would set fruit, because I had seen no pollinators around it. Something must have visited, because it now has several 5 inch follicles (seed pods) They are so heavy that they have toppled the tall spindly plant over. I will watch for the seeds to mature.



**October 8**

This is the first time I have seen a Gray Catbird (*Dumetella carolinensis*) visit the bird bath. As you can see it enjoyed splashing around also.



**October 12**

Today we took a hike on the Raven Cliff trail in North Georgia. This European Hornet (*Vespa crabro*) was crawling about beside the path. These insects are more than one inch long, and they look dangerous with their yellow and black markings. However, they are quite docile unless you threaten them or their nest. European hornets were introduced into this country about 1840, and they have since spread throughout the Eastern U.S. and out to the Dakotas in the northern part of their range. They are a protected species in Germany, and a large fine can be imposed for killing them.



In the photograph above, the three simple eyes can be seen on top of the head between the two large compound eyes.

We also saw some *Lycopodium digitatum* (above) in the woods. This is a very pretty ground cover only two or three inches tall. It has several common names including: ground pine, running cedar, and fan clubmoss. It is a member of an ancient group of plants called fern-allies. They produce no flowers but make spores as do ferns. There are about 950 species of this group world-wide. The generic name *Lycopodium* means “wolf foot”, variously said to be because the roots resemble wolf’s claws or because the branch tips of some species resemble wolf feet. The species pictured here has no resemblance to a wolf’s foot.



*Lycopodium* spores are collected and used commercially in a variety of ways. They are highly flammable because of a high oil content, and can be used to produce very impressive flashes and puffs of smoke, such as a magician might use. Lycopodium powder is also used as pill coatings and in foundries to prevent molten metal from sticking to wooden molds. The powder is also said to have many beneficial medical properties by those who believe in homeopathy or various herbal remedies.



Three water striders were gliding along on the stream that leads to Raven Cliffs



### October 14

We have an azalea in bloom this Fall. It is one of the “Encore” types that blooms both in the Spring and Fall. This Orange-Barred Sulphur (*Phoebis philia*) was probing for nectar, and you can see its long proboscis in the enlargement. The Orange-Barred Sulphur is a tropical species resident in Florida, Central Mexico, and south to Argentina. In our area it is a stray.



## October 18

We stopped in at the only “supermarket” in Oglethorpe County, and I was surprised to see these bags full of white cubes in the produce department. They were in there right next to the onions and other vegetables. At first I thought the bags contained some sort of white candy, such as divinity or white fudge. Only closer inspection I could tell it was kaolinite, a white clay that is mined in Middle Georgia and used for a variety of industrial purposes. It was being marketed as a novelty item called “Georgia White Dirt” and labeled as “not intended for human consumption” as can be seen on the label.



However, it is definitely being marketed for human consumption. The practice of eating dirt even has a fancy name: “geophagy” (which translates to eating dirt!). Geophagy is widespread in human history. At present it seems to be mainly practiced by children and pregnant women in tribal or rural societies. In our area, according to the store clerk and a



worker I talked to at a kaolin quarry, it is mainly pregnant women who eat the dirt. Geophagy is often encountered in the animal kingdom. Many of you have probably seen nature films where Amazonian parrots visit clay backs to eat

the dirt, but many other animals regularly eat dirt, particularly some form of clay.

Possible medical effects of eating clay are apparently poorly studied. Pregnant women eat clay to prevent nausea (Kaopectate, a commercial medicine marketed for diarrhea and indigestion) contained a clay (kaolinite) until the formula was changed in 2003.

I knew geophagy existed in our area, but this is the first time I have seen dirt being marketed in a supermarket here.

October 20



In the September notes, I mentioned that I had seen Gulf Fritillary (*Agraulis vanillae*) butterflies hovering over and perching on the Passionflower (*Passiflora incarnata*) vines along our driveway. I showed this picture of the caterpillar of a Variegated Fritillary (*Euptoieta claudia*) butterfly on a Passionflower leaf. The big black spines are soft and do not sting.



Today, I found a Gulf Fritillary caterpillar that had been feeding on a Passionflower leaf (note the chewed off edge of the leaf). These caterpillars only feed on species of Passionflower. The “Gulf” in their names comes from observations of migrating groups of them seen over the Gulf of Mexico. Both these butterfly species are toxic. The loud colors of the larvae effectively warn predators to leave them alone.



The last two views are of an adult Gulf Fritillary butterfly. They have a nice spotted pattern on their head.